

part one: project goal and  
evaluation

**The Cipher Box**

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Sharon McGill".

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A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Jan Conradi".

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HNRS 399

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**Honors Thesis Description and Evaluation:  
"The Cipher Box"**



*Beginning*

For my Honors Thesis project, I wanted to combine both my creative writing and graphic design majors by developing a complete "identity" for a short story I wrote entitled "The Cipher Box." The project took nearly a year and a half; a long and painstaking, yet incredibly rewarding process as I struggled with the story's character development and theme, ultimately producing over twenty drafts. The design aspect of the project included a logo, book design, and wooden box "packaging," and after I went through nearly as many design changes as writing drafts I finally produced the three beautiful "Cipher Box" books, complete with their unique cube containers.



*Development of the Text*

"The Cipher Box" began with a short story for my English 230 (Writing Composition) class, which I thought introduced, some intriguing possibilities. The initial work was entitled "Box #7800921" and told the story of how the protagonist, Alexis, discovers the nihilism in his dystopic world of the future where art is rigidly defined and contained. This first story was chilling and pessimistic, yet riddled with science fiction clichés, Star-Trek inspired names, and too-closely paralleled Orwell's 1984. It was written in a flat, generic prose, which I initially thought was appropriate, but later seemed monotone and interested only in the telling of the story, rather than allowing it to come alive.

What attracted me so much to "Box" was how it helped me articulate my own ideas about art. I thought the basic plot was strong and enjoyed the dark twist at the end. I wanted to push the character, Alexis, even further—to give more details on his past, his feelings and his world because I was learning to see through them to find truths about myself. I didn't pick up the story again until

much later, and after a few drafts finally wrote one entitled "The Cipher Box". The story that began in this rewrite was quite different in tone and perspective. I tried experimenting with first-person narration as I thought it would give Alexis more depth and complexity if the reader could see some of his memories and hear his insecurities. While this draft showed some colorful detail and placed more emphasis onto his friend, Dominique (who would later become a pivotal character), it was still not a direction that satisfied me.

A third series of drafts ensued and another experimental rewrite emerged. I had thought at this point that the story was going to stretch into a near-novella and began with greater detail and dialogue. Focusing more on the hierarchical structure of Alexis' world than in any previous draft, I began creating a Crayola-colored Orwellian world that I (thankfully) never finished. But even this draft wasn't without a few interesting contributions. Some sensory descriptions provided almost onomatopoeic sounds that I tried to carry into later versions.

In frustration, I began making major revisions again and gave the story a new title, "The Cipher Containment." I even changed Alexis' name to Damon Alexis, thinking I was clever as "Damon" is "nomad" spelled backwards. I knew by this time that the character was in search of answers but that he had to be more active in finding them. In previous drafts, he seemed to come upon information about the enigmatic Cipher rather passively, but now he is spurred to action.

Each one of these preliminary drafts marked a significant change in how the themes and characters of "The Cipher Box" continued to evolve. My penultimate draft, which was critiqued by my ENG 407 Fiction Workshop class, returned to the clarity and simplicity of "Box #7800921". It is a longer story but has a subtle, measured tone evident in its opening scene. I carefully reworked many of the story's awkward plot points, such as how the history of Cipher is presented, as well as the difficult descriptions within the Art Boxes. One major experimentation in this version is the use of tense switches. I wanted the desperation in Alexis' situation (his impending execution) to be immediate and inevitable. These passages are therefore in the present, although the bulk of the story is told in flashback. Dominique developed into the thematically important, yet physically absent character I had tried to make her in earlier drafts, an achievement I managed in the juxtaposition of her memory and Alexis' discovery in the Cipher Box. After submitting this draft to my fiction workshop class, I received a variety of reactions, as well as another more thorough critique by my professor.

Ultimately, the story developed fairly closely into what I intended in the final draft which I incorporated into the thesis project. An interesting addition to the text of the final draft was Alexis' thoughts about science, nature and the abstract. The Cipher Box experience itself changed slightly once again, now emphasizing Dominique's presence more forcefully.



#### *Development of Logo, Book and Box Design*

Once the story was completed, I began work on the design aspect of the project. The idea for the logo remained relatively unchanged throughout the project's development: a black square with the title written underneath in lowercase. I experimented with several variations on this basic formula, but ultimately rested on one that also incorporated a spiral. I thought the contrast of square, a perfect shape never found naturally, and the spiral, an organic symbol, was appropriate. For the book, I decided to create an extremely well crafted, clean design to focus on the text. I wanted the pages to have a museum-like quality as the text is centered perfectly, in a beautiful, highly legible font (Mrs. Eaves) that adds a classic tone. The paper is an acid-free, cotton-based ivory stock relating to the museum board used in matting works of art. The cover is simple; a soft, slightly metallic, textured paper that provides an elegant sensitivity and frames the printed logo and title.

The book structure adds yet another experience to the reader: the intrusive black squares placed randomly between the pages reflect the pits of darkness (black holes) Alexis is both compelled toward and repelled by. The square motif represents the scientific perfection of his world, yet relays an inhuman conformity—a conformity Alexis discovers has destroyed the humanity in art. The blank squares following the story, however, provide a pacifying element that the tale's dark ending may not; I wanted the reader to feel a release as Alexis finally discovers escape from the world that frustrated him.

The box "packaging" came about as I wanted the book contained in some way to protect and conceal it. So much of the story is about confinement—physical, emotional, and intellectual—and has a mysterious, cryptic tone as Alexis grapples with his inner conflict. I opted for a cube shape as the cube is spacially perfect, yet maintains an element of intrigue as cubes (like squares) rarely occur naturally. The best material for such a container is wood; it has a warm, natural essence, yet a paler, lighter wood could convey some of the cold objectivity of the story's prose and atmosphere.

As my woodworking abilities are somewhat limited, I collaborated with a fine wood craftsman, Carl Messenheimer, to produce the boxes. Following my basic dimensional requirements and the specification of sliding panels to conceal two opposing faces of the cube, Mr. Messenheimer designed the unique sliding and latching panels which conceal on one side, a mirror, and on the other, the book. The boxes have a mysterious appearance and command a presence by their size (8 inches cubed). I carved the logo into the sliding panels myself and added the blue velvet interiors to again add elegance and contrast. The mirror relates directly to the story's ending scene, where Alexis reflects upon himself and the flatness of his world. The addition of an imbedded mirror in the panel revealing the one in the cube creates the affect of endless square repetitions that continue the themes of both infinity and constraint.



#### *Reflections*

The development and evolution of "The Cipher Box" was a crucial learning experience for me as a writer and a designer. Process was more important than product; the continual self-doubts I felt, the volume of writing I produced and the critiques I received from this one story made me more disciplined and focused. After finishing "The Cipher Box," I felt a greater confidence in critiquing my own work and an increased flexibility in making alterations and changes. I learned to effectively evaluate and revise my work, and since I experimented with various narrative strategies, I gained greater ability within the medium of short story writing. I also improved my communication skills with other designers and artists, not only through the extensive critiques with my faculty mentor, Jan Conradi, but also in the collaboration with the craftsman, Carl Messenheimer, my writing professor, Margaret Dimoplon and another art professor, Aimee Bott. Each of these collaborations affected the process and final product of the project; a work of art relating to art and an exploration and extension of myself.



story criticisms

■  
Sharon—In this draft you set the story in a frame, but you don't reveal the narrator's condemnation to death via the Cipher Box. I like this frame better than the original—there's a chilling foreshadowing presented that doesn't give the story away at the beginning.

In my phone conversation, you said you'd changed the story, more, for entry into the [National Society of Arts and Letters' Short Story] competition—so it will be interesting to learn how any critiquing remarks may correspond with any changes you have already made. My remarks came from having seen the story in various drafts—each one quite different from the preceding as the story has evolved.

As I've said several times, it's a most complex story and there's much for the reader to attend to!

The story is set up immediately as taking place far in the future. It's good we know this. My thought is, the year could be projected further into the future—33 years from the present not being that far away [margin note: Disregard all this!! I've just realized the date is 2231—so it's 233 years! Mea culpa!] . . . You do, however, find good, solid support for this Artistic and Cultural radical change on page 2, so maybe it's not a problem. The idea of genetic revolution would radically change everything—but maybe not so quickly.

For such a large and significant story, though all that, said is a small point raised.

In this draft, Dominique has become a more significant figure, and in this reading, I'm interpreting the art he (the narrator) is to evaluate (and fails evaluating) is Dominique's—so that this draft seems more well-knitted together. It has the element of a love story, which I think works—

This draft excellently describes the Boxes—the experience of the boxes is clarified beautifully, p. 3. What is difficult to make clear for the reader, you have clarified. I think you've solved that omission I found a problem before. You've made something abstract, concrete enough to satisfy the reader.

The State's subtle appropriation of art and individual art consciousness is made chillingly clear in this dystopia. Art for the Service of the State, and art jealously guarded for the few is the Semantic thread throughout. It's far-fetched, and yet, not so far-fetched in the mind of some who love a hierarchial approach to life, to art, to everything. It's the antithesis of the thesis of art scholar, Ellen Dissanayake's book which argues for *homo aestheticus*, biological human being whose art impulse is *biologically* innate, a survival element within us, not something belonging to an arcane few.

So, this story takes on a subject of immense proportions and succeeds. It's certainly among the best of any of the stories any of my students have ever written. It reveals artistic sentimentality, authority, craftsmanship, and your handling of narrative prose is noteworthy.

Page 4 tells us of Alexis' condensation (*sic*) to death and also explains how his death will occur via the Cipher Box. I think this is important information to include. Throughout, the reader feels Alexis' pull toward black holes—their beauty, in the pull of the natural world in its fantastic experience. The reader senses his awe of this cosmic fact now visible via hologram. The motif of blue, which figures importantly in Box 107 is complex—but seems to relate to the black hole concept. Blue, as darkness made visible. Alexis finds art in the cosmos. The natural universe. I'm not clear as to what he experiences in Box 107 or if it is Dominique's work. Page 7 suggests this to me when, in the midst of the aesthetic experience of blue, Alexis experiences Dominique's pulling up daisies, which also suggests to me she has become an agent of the State, but for sake of



old love and friendship reminds him that he does not yet belong to the State's programming. The innate individual core of him is not yet appropriated.

Here, it appears Alexis makes a choice—the choice that condemns him.

Page 8 may need some toning down of the frenzy surrounding his defection. It feels a bit over dramatic to me.

I'm still think about the ending. The equating of the human image with art.

There's so much here, Sharon—Although this story is long for the *MT Cup*, I think you should submit it. Not all its meanings are clear. In a truly good story, they never are.

--MKD

Select Notes and Critiques from my Fiction 407 Workshop class  
2-20-98

■

Great art film concepts brewing in my head. This seems to be at times too similar to other "advanced" societies or "State" controlled environments like 1984 and others. The twist on Art of the State was good, though seemed a tad contrived and corny. "Art wars" reminds me of "Demolition Man's" "Franchise Wars". I think it could have been more effective if the Aesthetics were one division among many instead of merely with the Scientists. I like the protagonist a lot. He showed depth; someone who was born into a position he was expected to live up to, but knew better.

Setting up a short story is hard sometimes.

I didn't get to finish my comments, but the session spoke for itself.

Thorough! Good! Incredible!

—Dave B.

■

Sharon—Have you read *Dune*? This makes me think of *Dune*.

This is an excellent story, very well thought through. You have a beautiful writing style that makes the reader want to finish the story to know what happens and to find out how you will say it. I enjoyed this immensely.

You did a good job of creating a futuristic world without it bugging the hell out of me. Many future-themed stories are haphazard and dorky in their terminology, but I think this is successfully done.

Subject matter is interesting and unique. Are you a philosophy student? Art?

I really don't think I have any suggestions for change, beyond a couple punctuation errors I marked.

—Holly Layman

■

Sharon—I really like this. You do a good job of creating a world unlike ours. Society and paradigms of thought are completely different. Your descriptions are vivid and the plot is intriguing.

But how does the Cipher Box affect Alexis? There isn't any reaction to it. Does he so submissively kill himself because he has no choice? Since he had found an independent will and voice, I was expecting him to try and escape or something.

In my opinion, with a few minor insights at the end, this is a first rate short story.

—Jeff Marker

■

I enjoyed very much the futuristic setting. I really appreciated that the story took its time, if you will, to establish the setting and the parameters. I was very excited to read this as it reminded me of Orwell and Huxley. The conflict was good as I found it original that it was the mother who set it up by denying her daughter her true destiny. Also, the concept of art as becoming ultimately predominant is original; it's usually technology. Description is definitely a strength in this piece.

I am told you have written a revision to this piece. I would consider myself privileged if I could read it sometime. Great piece.

As a thought, the art world is fine. After all, Asimov invented "psychohistory" in *Foundation*.

Best wishes,

--Angel Rivera

■

Why did [Alexis] say she say nothing [p. 7] when you spent several paragraphs telling us what she saw? I like this! [the twist ending; "art" written below the mirror] Worth waiting for. When you ask the warden "What if I don't kill myself" I thought you were going in the direction of conscientious objector. This I could buy into as you have set the stage as an oppressive government who is passive to physical violence (anti-state inflicted capital punishment). Had she looked in the mirror and not killed herself would have been more reasonable to me. She obviously had seen her reflection before because she describes her own looks to us, therefore I doubt the mirror would've had such a profound effect. I like the story overall but found just a few leaps in logic that I could not in good conscience traverse. I like the use of the concept of the mirror. I like "art" as the title on the brass plate. I like the details used to describe the govt. and society and I m looking forward to the rewrite.

—Ward D. Townsend

■

I applaud you for taking an interesting approach to a very well-trodden concept (the "oppressive future world where free thinkers are quashed" tale), but feel you may have over worked your notions of "imaginative science fiction." I felt as if you were trying to showcase originality and constantly underscoring thoughts and phrases with unnecessary emphasis. It is odd your narrator would describe his world in such terms—why is he so directly and consistently critical? He is a genetically manipulated part of a controlled system, at what point would non-conformist views develop? The notion that our rebellions can arise within us, regardless of our environment, is interesting—but somewhat unsupported by the totality of "standard facism" encompassed in your "State's" descriptions. Finally, the ending is slightly bland. Though it fits with your narrative direction, it just strikes me s implausible. This may be a personal issue—science fiction, for me, is grounded inside of certain limitations. When we wish to work outside of these, strong justifications are required. Why would seeing a reflection produce "suicidal madness"?—beyond, I mean, the romantic charm such an ending has. It just seems like you could have put anything in that "Box"—a cut daffodil, for instance, and had the character react the same way. Somehow, I'm left wishing for something more solid. Alexis' suicide is also inconsistent with his "against the grain" nature. There are reasons why he might kill himself, even given his skepticism beforehand, but they seem disparate with the existing flow.

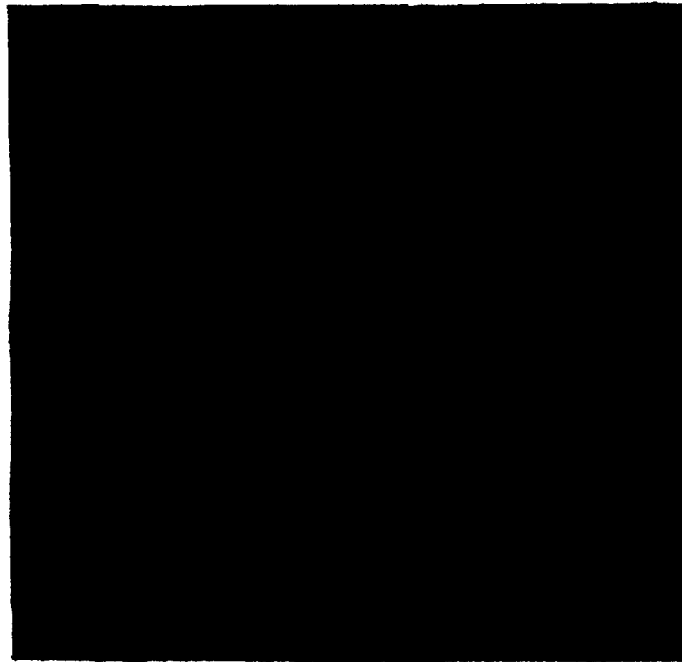
As you might tell, I'm writing reactions instead of speaking them. The comment about "no one knowing the Cipher-Box" is valid in that probably death-sentenced dissidents attract attention in this sort of world.

But, since you've already done your radical changes, these long, blood-coloured comments are meaningless.

—Jaeson Welch



part two: preliminary sketches,  
notes, and drafts



begin: initial proposal  
and early drafts

Sharon McGill

Outline for Honors Thesis

Mentor: Jan Conradi, Design Professor

October 2, 1997

**The Ciphyr Box:  
A Visual Narrative**

**Project Summary:** This project will integrate written and visual information in the form of a complete gallery showing. I will transcribe my short story "The Ciphyr Box" in various designs on mounted canvas panels *and/or* installations. This format will reflect several themes of the piece: a questioning of the definitions, parameters, and standards of art, as well as the "sacredness" of the museum. I hope that a gallery show will enable an audience not only to interpret the written work, but also become part of the physical and psychological space of the story.

**Outline**

**I. Research and Writing**

- A. Revise/edit/critique current draft of "The Ciphyr Box"
- B. Continue research on Modernist art history and contemporary views
- C. Begin research on design typographers, printing press, art galleries

**II. Sketches and Ideation**

- A. Break story into sections or excerpts: determine if should be on flat panel, 3-D installation, etc.
- B. Thumbnails of panel designs, work on computer, diagram sequence in a gallery space
- C. Figure cost of materials, purchase supplies, reserve gallery space

**III. Production**

- A. Building: canvases, frames, boxes, etc.
- B. Printing story: using press, hand-painted, or computer generated
- C. Critique, continue research, rewrite, redesign
- D. Install in gallery space

**IV. Presentation**

Sharon McGill

(The City-Box)  
Box #7800921

Alexis Marcolean knew about art. He knew every aspect of every Movement, every theme of every artist, and every concept of every piece. He was accurate and thorough in the assessment of each Painting to the point of obsession. He was considered to be the top Historian of his generation. He was to be the greatest Historian of all time.

Alexis knew his life was destined for the study of Aesthetics. Perhaps it was because he should have never had the opportunity to become one of the finest minds of the Academy of Aesthetics and Truth. As if it weren't strange enough that a 45-year-old was admitted to the highest university on Earth (and indeed there was a debate over admittance; never had an individual begun his studies so young)--his own genes had almost doomed him to a life fixing passenger ships for transplanetary travel. But fate had always been on Alexis' side, so when the career prognosis on his genetic chart read "Technologist", his mother, Soren Marcolean, a famed Cognoscente of the artworld, found easy avenues through the Ministry of Genetic Sorting and Education to alter her son's career. Indeed, the Ministry chair himself was one of Soren's most devoted admirers, and after his career plans were remedied, Alexis was offered profound apologies for what was obviously a rare, but sometimes unavoidable, mix-up. Two hundred geneticists at the Ministry were fired for negligence.

Alexis had always felt horrible about the action against those geneticists, and as he entered the grand hallway of the America Gallery, he again felt the guilty weight in his stomach. He knew there had been no genetic mix-up twenty-three years ago. He truly had the mind of a Technologist--a mind for facts, details, and specifics--something he came to realize quickly in his education as he had to apply himself three times more than his peers in understanding and articulating the basics of Aesthetic study. But Alexis had the heart of an artist, and therefore endured the demanding Academy curriculum in the hopes that one day in his predetermined life span of 131 short years it could help him in his determined search for Truth. Perhaps, he mused, that day had come.

Alexis met with his mentor Aesthetician, Kirana, in a small anteroom in the west wing of the Gallery. She reminded him to relax and that today's examination was like hundreds before. Alexis said nothing as he took a mental inventory of the past five years of study that had been devoted to this very day. At that time, the year 2718 had seemed so far off; the moment of his Final Dissertation only a dim prediction to haunt his dreams. But the thought of becoming a Magna Cognoscente was too much to bear. He followed Kirana into the examination chamber.

The examiners stood up from their seats in the center of the room as Kirana and Alexis entered. Cognoscentes Moely, Hemmrock, and Aluze, with whom Alexis had studied under and alongside at the Academy, were present, as well as Cgns. Firence, and Omag from the University of Aesthetic Studies. Alexis greeted each of these intellectuals with deep respect, for all were well-regarded as Historians and represented some of the most advanced aesthetic minds on Earth. But his greatest surprise was in meeting Magna Cognoscente Hull, the most informed, sought-after Historian in the field. Alexis' throat tightened.

"Salutations, Cgn. Marcolean," Hull said, "We are all excited to hear your dissertation. I know we're all familiar with your interpretations--very nice work." Several of his colleagues nodded in agreement.

"Many thanks," Alexis replied, attempting to hide the tremor in his voice, "I hope today proves to be my most enlightened evaluation."

"Indeed," the M.Cgn. answered, "we shall see. Let us commence with the examination then."

The small group of intellectuals seated themselves again in the plush, white chairs of the examination room. Kirana indicated to Alexis where his seat was so that he might listen to his instructions, which Cgn. Moely was preparing to give.

"Gathered colleagues," she began, "we are here today to witness a most spectacular revelation. I'm assured that you all are as excited as am I about the potential for interpretive genius to take place this afternoon. For as we know well enough, all artists in the State are geniuses, and therefore to understand the work of such an advanced mind is in itself an act of genius--one that only the very advanced intellectuals can understand. I must digress for a moment to point out that this last detail was only furthered emphasized to me but a few weeks ago. I was at the main transport terminal in New Beijing



when I was accosted by one of those angry RedDrones insisting that the artists on the island communes be integrated into society so that 'everyone could benefit' from their wisdom, as he put it." Moely laughed at the thought, "And you know what I did, of course--I had him arrested immediately." Several of the audience members laughed. Moely smiled. Alexis listened, the tightening in his throat sank to his stomach.

"But before he was taken away, I felt it my duty to show him his ignorance and the potential consequences of it," Moely continued, "Artists are a higher form of humanity, I told him. Their perspective on life and clarity of thought would drive a man such as him insane in attempting to understand their genius. Left alone, they would be a danger to society and to themselves if they were not genetically identified, properly sequestered from the Public and trained in the medium of Painting, and then left to live their lives in the communes for the sole purpose of creating art. For art, as we're all aware, is both the simplest and most complicated of all man's creations--Painting being the highest form of art, as it is the only medium of *immediate* communication of pure, artistic thought. And it is our job as Historians and keepers of this great art to define, interpret, and communicate the meaning of every work that comes out of the communes in order to preserve the ideas of Aesthetics for all humanity."

At this, Moely paused to give each member of the assembled audience a moment to contemplate his or her own significance to the course of human history. The only individual who did not do so was Alexis, who stared blankly at his feet, remembering when Etienne, his best friend for the first ten years of his life, was taken away, without warning, to live in a commune on Hawaii Island.

"Well, enough about ourselves," continued Moely, "It is now time for our most distinguished guest, M. Cgn. Hull to discuss the examination piece." The thin woman nodded at the distinguished Magna Cognoscente, indicating his turn, and took her seat.

Hull stood up slowly, as if feeling the weight of humanity on his shoulders. He took his place before the group and began the specifics of the examination.

"My distinguished colleagues, we are an exclusive lot indeed," he began. "For today we not only have among us perhaps the finest young mind produced for the Aesthetics, but we also have with us a most unique work of art for Cgn. Marcolean to analyze. The artist Cgn. Marcolean has yet to discover

has never before been exhibited, never before been discussed, and certainly never before been under serious scrutiny outside of the commune. I will not yet reveal his name, for it would serve no purpose. He is, for now, anonymous. I myself have not even seen the work, and yet I was informed by his mentors at the commune that his is the most outstanding work they've seen to date," he paused for a second, weighing the import of his next statement, "It may be as near to perfection as the work of the ill-fated <sup>Ciphyr</sup> ~~before his unfortunate end.~~"

As the M. Cgn. spoke, Alexis felt the tightening once again in his stomach. A new talent? Was it possible? Did the examination board have so much confidence in his abilities that they would trust his assessment of a work they themselves had never before seen--a talent comparable to Messerheim, no less? He clasped his hands tightly and shuddered at the thought of his fortune. Perhaps. . .he pondered--perhaps this work might be the answer to his elusive Truth. Anticipation broke out in a sweat on his forehead.

"Cgn. Marcolean you have exactly five minutes upon entering Box #998350 to make an assessment of this work. At the end of this interval, you shall return to us and report upon your findings. I trust we shall not be disappointed," M. Cgn. Hull sat down as Kirana indicated to Alexis that it was time to enter the Box.

Alexis had a difficult time getting out of his seat. He had never been so nervous in anticipation as he was now, and his legs had a difficult time obeying the command to stand up. Finally, he took Kirana's hand and was led to the door in the wall to which the guests had been facing.

It's only a Box, thought Alexis, like the thousands I've entered before.

The forcefield was disengaged and Alexis entered alone.

The Box was indeed like all the others Alexis had known: a five meter-square hardwood floor, pristine sterile walls, exceptional hidden lighting, and a lofty ceiling 6.5 meters above him. It was the ideal environment for the assessment of a Painting: isolated, customized, and completely focused on the huge, 3m X 2.75m canvas perfectly hung on the wall facing him at the standard height of 1.5 meters from the floor. Alexis gasped.

The painting was magnificent.

A life-sized silhouette of a human figure, the artist most likely, was outlined in the center in blue, with arms outstretched, head thrown back. In the center of the figure was a great circular concentration of built-up pigments: red, yellow, arosia, and several others that Alexis had never seen before. Surrounding the silhouette were infinite numbers of other images: ingenious adaptations of the landscape--trees, mountains, the sun, moon, stars, and planets--and several more abstract drawings that Alexis couldn't identify. As he timidly approached the masterpiece, his eyes slowly absorbing every detail of the perfect craftsmanship--the excellence and originality in line, composition, shape, and color--he took notice of the fingerprints on the piece; smudges of green, black, brown, and gray distributed across the entire canvas and seemingly minute compared to the massiveness of the piece and the greatness of its significance. To the right of the canvas, on a small, plain card mounted on the wall was the title: THE ARTIST. Alexis stood back. He felt as if he were teetering on the edge of Truth.

After his initial amazement at the scope of the piece, Alexis began to feel the moments draining. He remembered his purpose in viewing this Painting and began to search his thoughts. The familiar routine of searching for precedents, influences, and similarities to other artists ran through his head, but he could think of none. The comparison of line, shape, and the formal elements came to mind, but they were used so uniquely and originally that he could not think of another artist of similar skill. And finally, the search for Purpose and Idea came to mind.

Alexis paused.

The painting now seemed to wane under his gaze, growing less and less magnificent the longer he stared. At first, Alexis thought the lighting was growing dimmer, then the room was getting smaller, but--no. Nothing had changed. Except, when he looked closer at the piece, it seemed. . .empty. The colors were still as vivid, the execution of fundamental techniques were still impeccable--but there was a void. Alexis feared his revelation because the longer he looked, the more apparent the void was to the point of appearing, before his very eyes, in the center of the figure. Directly in the core of the silhouette, the ball of glorious pigments radiated emptiness. It was blank and symbolized nothing.

Alexis quickly turned away from the Painting. This couldn't be happening--(was he really feeling this sick?)--the Painting was glorious, outstanding, the pinnacle of human perfection, just as the M. Cgn.

said it would be! The air was thick, and for the first time in his life, Alexis wished he were busily working away on the gargantuan engines of some grounded passenger ship, a pleasantly ignorant and removed Technologist. But he hadn't the time to waste. He wiped his brow.

Moments later, the room darkened and Alexis knew his time had passed. He walked out of the room in a haze, his throat burning and his feet ice cold. The examination board sat before him patiently.

Alexis stood before the group and hesitated. For the first time in his career as a student--for the first time in his life--he had no idea what to say. He stood in front of the most intelligent minds on the planet and was speechless. He gasped. His dry throat swallowed. After several agonizing minutes, he finally managed to concentrate his thoughts into forced beginning: "In this Painting I find. . . That is, I see that--"

Alexis stopped, fumbled, prayed. "It would appear that the artist in this interpretation. . . ." The words caught in his throat like phlegm. A tomb of silence fell upon the room, which was now uncomfortably warm.

Kirana saw Alexis' struggle, but was perplexed, "What did you find, Alexis?"

"I found--I found--" Alexis quickly looked to his feet for help, but as usual, they were no inspiration. Before he could stop himself, he heard: "I found nothing."

The thick silence fell again. Several of the examiners frowned and glanced at each other. M. Cgn. Hull asked, "You found *what*?"

"I found nothing," Alexis repeated, without a stutter.

Kirana stumbled to save him--"What!!--I'm sure you mean that you--you--found nothing. . . that you've ever seen before--am I right?"

"I found nothing whatsoever," Alexis repeated, "For there was nothing to see."

"There has been a mistake," M. Cgn. Hull stated bluntly, "This is a mistake of profound proportions and I think you realize that, Cgn. Marcolean. I hope you will now quickly take the opportunity to rescind this utter lunacy before I have you stripped entirely of the title of Cognoscente and reduced the level of a Drone! Save your career and speak some sense. Now!"

But by this time Alexis had fallen, and he was so close to Truth he could nearly grasp it. Yet, it still eluded him, "I will rescind nothing for I believe in what I know and see, and I have found emptiness and void in this Painting and that is my assessment. I thank you for the opportunity--"

"Security alert!" Hull screamed, the chords of his short neck and the blue veins of his forehead very prominently displaying themselves. He jumped up from his chair and pointed ferociously and accusingly at Alexis, "Seize this criminal and confine him immediately before he blasphemes any more the name Art and everything we hold sacred!" Spittle exploded from his lips. The other intellectuals were also on their feet, ready to tackle Alexis themselves. Even Kirana stood in anger, glaring at Alexis as if he were some despicable species of insect contaminating the very fabric of her existence.

Alexis was bound before he had a chance to see the guards. Their tranquilizer gun finally provided him with a blessed void of his own.

Two weeks later, Alexis sat in the solitude of a nine-square-meter cell. He smiled faintly at the irony of his confinement--so like a Box, it seemed, except that the floors were of triladium and the lighting was horrible. He awaited the guard who would lead him to certain death.

Strangely, Alexis was excited about the prospect of his fate. Naturally, he understood that the State was too far advanced to be reduced to the brutality of killing convicted criminals. No capital punishment had been carried out directly by the State in over five hundred years. Most enemies to the Public Good were merely sent off to a prison colony on some isolated, horribly brutal planet like Danus III. But that was not Alexis' sentence. He knew that he was far above such a simple treatment by a Justice Board that knew of his reputation, his intelligence, his influence, and, most importantly, a Board that understood the ramifications of his actions if the word of his deed had spread to the Public which, fortunately, it had not. Not surprisingly the ever-resourceful State had a special treatment for criminals like Alexis--individuals who had grossly offended the ideals of Aesthetics that built the State, and who had attempted to undermine the hierarchy of intelligence and carefully balanced Truths that defined the perfect human society.

Alexis had been sentenced to Box #7800921, the Ciphyr Box.

Ciphyr

Alexis had only heard of the ~~Box~~ Box once in his entire career in Histories and, indeed, he only needed to hear of it once. It had been created in the year 2455 by the crazed artist ~~Box~~ Ciphyr ~~Box~~, still respected today from his early works, despite his escape from the artist's colony of Japan. He was, before his one-man revolution, considered the greatest artist of all time--his vision surpassing even that of the ancient Painters Picasso and Van Gogh. But his genius was too great for any one human to contain, and he lost his mind--a rare occasion in the closely controlled artist communes. Somehow he had managed to reach the mainland of the East and held himself hostage in the Province Gallery in the city of Seoul, threatening to kill himself if anyone entered the building while he created his masterpiece, Box #7800921. After three weeks, he stumbled out of the Gallery, scarcely alive and laughing wildly, horribly bleeding from every limb. He died on the Gallery steps, raving about the creation to save the world. After his death, his brain and DNA were studied furiously until all hope was lost as to the cause of his madness. All traces of him were destroyed.

Except for Box #7800921.

The first twenty Historians who dared to view the piece went mad and committed suicide moments after emerging from the doomed Box. Finally a Drone was sent to see it, an unprecedented act, but made no assessment except that he didn't know what it was and, predictably, didn't understand it. Eventually, right before the entire Gallery was slated for demolition, the State came to realize exactly what a gift ~~Box~~ Ciphyr ~~Box~~ had left behind. Any Historian who saw the piece would kill him or herself. So, in the year 2457, dissenting Historians with potentially damaging interpretations of artists were sentenced to ~~Box~~ Ciphyr ~~Box~~'s Box.

Alexis didn't know exactly how many Historians had died after viewing the piece, but he was certain to be the next.

The Gallery was unimpressive: Alexis had seen many grander structures. But the building's aesthetic quality was no longer deemed worthy of maintaining, according to the State, so it had somewhat tarnished in the hands of Time. Alexis was unfettered while being brought in; indeed, he had no desire to attempt escape. He only wanted to view the Box.

He was taken to an anteroom not unlike the one in which Kirana had wished him luck some few weeks before. Two Drone guards stood at either side of him, and he stood before a Magna Cognoscente, awaiting a Final Word.

"You, Alexis Marcolean, have been duly sentenced to view Box #7800921. As you should well know, there will be no assessment upon your viewing of the piece. There will only be this:" the M Cgn. motioned toward the wall just outside of the Box's entrance where a gray, hypodermic distributor rested in a small, box-like cradle.

"That hypodermic contains a lethal dose of althunium cyanide," the M. Cgn. continued, "which, after viewing the piece, you will, of your own accord, administer to yourself. No one will be in this room. The State will not be responsible for your death, but will have rid itself of a threat and offence to the Public Good. This is your sentence. Are you prepared to enter Box # 7800921?"

"What if I don't kill myself?" Alexis asked.

"You will," the M. Cgn. answered bluntly.

"Then I am prepared," Alexis replied. He was then led to the Box entrance, a simple door with a magnetic forcefield like any other in any Gallery of any Province. He felt an unusual calm. The Drones beside him deactivated the door, and Alexis entered.

The overhead lighting immediately illuminated the room. The first thing Alexis noted was the humming noise--most likely from the lights themselves from years of little or no maintenance. And then, of course was the smell; it was stale and empty and cold. And then he noticed the piece.

Mounted on the far wall, the standard five meters away and 1.5 meters from the warped, hardwood floor, was a box. Alexis guessed it was approximately one meter in width by 0.75 meters in height. It was made of exquisite, dark wood and the side facing Alexis was exposed, making it appear as a kind of deep frame. It wasn't until he walked up to within about half a meter from the piece that he noticed something moving inside on the very back. With the poor, overhead lighting it was extremely difficult to discern anything, but Alexis finally recognized the moving object was himself in a strange, 2-dimensional simulation. He waved his right hand in front of his face. His replicated imaged waved back. Excitement poured over Alexis as he recognized the back of the box to be an ancient mirror.

Only once in his life could he remember anything like the ancient mirror on the wall. He had seen another one at age six, on a trip with his mother to a Drone colony in the Alaska Province to hunt through the marketplaces for various items of antiquity. Soren Marcolean had an eye for unique objects and artifacts and knew the best places in which to find them. That summer's day in the marketplace, Alexis had seen the mirror leaning against a pile of rubbish in a poor Drone's tent. It had surprised him as he passed it, to watch his chubby, childish legs walk past without the vivid three-dimensionality of a holovid. He remembered tugging Soren's arm to ask her about the bizarre flatness of his reflection, but she was engaged in barter with a loud, boisterous merchant trying to sell cheap replicas of porcelain. Alexis had walked up to the mirror, much as he had now, and touched the smooth, silvery surface.

And now he reached out to touch it again, except this time he wasn't going to be rudely jerked back by his mother, only to receive a scolding for straying too far. Now, Alexis had his chance to fully see his image in all of the mirror's beautiful flatness, recessed as it was, in the darkness of the deep frame. After marveling at the delicacy and smoothness of the mirror, preserved here in the dustless viewing Box, he looked at his face in the reflection. The old, deteriorating lights were sickly and yellow on his plain face and the plain, gray prison overalls he wore. It was then that he saw his desperation; the hungry look on his haggard countenance that had forever hoped to be filled with the knowledge and the power of Art. But the fulfillment never came, and even at the height of his illustrious career as a brilliant student with a genius for Aesthetics, he was as empty and false as the lonely image of himself in the dark mirror. Then he saw the brass plate.

It was nestled along the center of the frame, leaning up against the mirror as the titles on ancient Paintings were once displayed, engraved in brass. Indeed, the plate seemed to be of that same variety of marker and was, in fact, engraved with a title. Alexis read the title and immediately the cold chill of understanding spread throughout his body and a slight smile alighted his face. He looked again into the smooth plane of glass and saw for the first and last time what it had taken him only one-third of his lifetime to find.

Alexis turned away from the piece and exited the room. The anteroom was empty, as promised. He located the hypodermic of althunium cyanide and did not hesitate to inject himself. He did not feel the



Death absorbing through his body because he was warm with fulfillment. The M. Cgn. and the Drone entered fifteen minutes later to remove the body.

There was a single word engraved on the plate:

TRUTH.

Sharon McGill  
February 19, 1998

### The Cipher Box

The Warden's gray trousers make an efficient *zip zip* as he escorts me down the museum entrance. The building walls reveal a century of neglect as does the stale air, though its stagnancy is more from the sight of vacant rooms that once held the greatest Art of the State than from the weight of decades. I see nothing as I glimpse into these decaying Box rooms as they pass, quick and repetitive, like windows on the subway transport. The lighting is ghastly green; the old halogens had burnt out long ago and were replaced by cheaper flourescents. Their high frequency buzz and slight strobe is hypnotic, but their radiance makes the hallway unnaturally crisp.

Since early childhood I knew my life was destined for the study of Aesthetics. Mother was the famed Magna Cognoscente Soren Marcolean, who in 2231 was at the peak of her career as an Aesthetician. Her gala parties in our home attracted quite an array of the State's most enlightened Ministers, Art Historians, and other members of the Aesthetic elite. Their nameless faces are ambiguous now, blending in my mind like thin watercolors. Even at age four, I recognized the importance of these people, but never guessed they came to Mother's parties merely to praise each other and bask in their own brilliance. For me, the house was a place to look and appreciate, but never touch or speak, At least not without direction.

"Come, dear Alexis," Mother would say, placing me on a tall, rectangular banister of the grand staircase so the ocean of curious eyes could see me. "Recite for us the Historian's Creed."

Such a display was not unusual. I would oblige, of course, dutifully and respectfully.

"We the Art Historians are the leaders of an necessary elite," I would say, my voice cracking as it fell upon those shining, upturned faces. "We possess the knowledge of the greatest of human abilities: discernment of the natural essence elucidated by Aesthetics. We seek the shared experience of the Artist, the journey into the obscurity of human thought conveyed through emotions that transcend time and space. We recognize, codify, and evaluate for the greater good of humanity the nature of the universe. We are the interpreters of genius and the sole protectors of universal forms. We are the purveyors of <sup>truth</sup> Truth."

Cheers and cries of bravo! bravo! <sup>Came from the Spectators</sup> Mother beams at me, the prodigy. My smile is brief and self-conscious.

Dominique was the one friend I had as a child. Our fathers had been colleagues for years, botanists working at the same BioLab outside the city. Mother reveled in the fact that I could associate with a future Artist at such a young age and arranged for us to play together every Saturday morning. Dom's favorite activity was to lie on our backs upon the square of hybrid grasses in Father's greenhouse and stare through the transparent roof at the sky. I knew she envied the greenhouse. It was as close as either of us could come to open air. Once, I tried to pluck Father's daffodils for her, but she covered her ears in pain and begged that I stop.

"What's wrong, Dom? I thought you liked flowers."

"They scream, Alexis," she replied, "It hurts my head."

Our conversations revolved around a dream to fly away and explore the universe. We had an unspoken agreement never to discuss the confinement of our lives nor the inevitable end to our friendship. We knew our genes would ultimately betray us, but it happened too soon.

Dominique was taken away to the Artist Communes at age six. I wasn't warned of the date, and the following Saturday I patiently waited in my room for the house servant to show her in, but she never appeared. Mother was gone again on speaking tour, so I asked Father where she might be. He answered with a straight face in the soft, logical voice he would use to explain his genetic regeneration experiments.

"Dominique has gone to the Commune, Alexis. She is to be an Artist and must be in the company of other people who can teach her to understand her genius. We must accept this and be happy that the State is sensitive to the needs of all of its citizens, especially its <sup>artists</sup> Artists."

My own genetic blueprint predestined me to the work of a scientist or technologist, <sup>b</sup> But Mother wouldn't be shamed so easily. As a result of her influences, I was upgraded to become a Historian like her, and soon after Dominique was taken, I was sent to the Academy.

I spent the next fifteen years learning everything known ~~and knowable~~, thought, and written about Art history, the essential forms, the Aesthetic revelation of genius and its support of State supremacy. I filled my days with the Art Wars of the early 22nd century, the shift from economic to intellectual advancement of cultures, the Genetic Revolution, the Second Renaissance, and finally, the Pax Aestheticus and creation of the world State and intellectual caste society. History, it seemed, had proven to the world the superiority of the <sup>artist</sup> Artist over science, technology, and all other schools of thought, and the Academy was the center of <sup>art</sup> Art appreciation. I thought at that time that becoming a great Historian like Mother was all that the Academy espoused: service to humanity to further the advancement of mind and spirit. I therefore abandoned myself to academics and quickly emerged as one of the top minds of my class, Or so I was told.

"Alexis, you are a true genius!" professors would exclaim, "You represent the future of our honored craft. You are wonderful, brilliant—the image of Soren. Will you be taking my class next term?"

As diligent as I might have appeared, my experience at the Academy soon fell into a downward progression. While at first I was happy to gain the adoration of my professors, the exclusivity of the Academy curriculum wore me down. It was an accepted fact that many students would drop out or be ejected for <sup>one</sup> ~~this~~ very reason; they simply could not accept the rigor and intensity of classes. Only so many individuals could become Historians, the Academy said. Yet I was determined to succeed. I focused myself to a near obsession.

As I grew older, however, the distraction continued. Dominique's image haunted my mind. She would be lying on her back in the greenhouse, staring at the sky with lids half-closed, hands crossed over her chest. She was my sole confidante, although in my mind she never responded to me. I wished to fly again. Sometimes I spoke to her out loud, not even realizing it until I noticed the curious stares. Other students at the Academy continued to avoid me, some knowing I didn't really belong, and others, I wasn't sure, I assumed they were intimidated by my studiousness and tried to ignore them. Mother was the sole

try → I wasn't sure about the others. I assumed...

person aside from professors who actually talked to me during that time, only to pressure me with constant reassurance: "This is your calling, Alexis."

A calling to what, I wanted to ask.

And of course there were the Boxes.

"The Box is the sublime experience," the Magna Cognoscentes would say, "An artistic voyage in complete isolation. No more, the flat dullness of pictures or the immobility of objects. The Box contains the essence of pure, Artistic thought—the manifestation of truth."

My first Box experience was overwhelming. I was twelve years old, yet even with six years of study already, I was skeptical. Having read a great deal about the theory of Boxes, the esteem with which they were held in the Artworld, and their importance in perpetuating the truths of the State, I didn't anticipate any surprises in my first viewing.

I couldn't have been more unprepared.

All Boxes are separate rooms located in the long hallways of museums. On the day of that first viewing, I walked into my assigned Box, one in a line of many darkened chambers. It brightened immediately as I entered to reveal a seven meter square floor, pristine white walls and no windows. I had always assumed from my readings that there would be installations of some sort inside, perhaps something physical made in the manner of Artists from centuries past. But I was surprised to find nothing.

After a few moments of impatience, the Box experience began. I felt a fuzzy heaviness; the weight of sleep descending. My body relaxed and I started to dream of my first examination at the Academy. I had been so anxious and afraid of failure that day I made myself sick. I relived the nausea in the Box, feeling it not just in my stomach but in all of my limbs. In front of me stretched the massive classroom: staring, questioning, the Magna Cognoscente drilling me with questions about the Art Wars, the discourse of Artists, the utopia of the State. But after the vision disappeared and I was left alone in the empty room, the nervousness had given over to warm relief.

"Whatever the Artist wishes the Historian to experience—the pain of failure, the glory of war, the infiniteness of the universe—" M. Cgn. Xerlux explained, "can be brought to mind in the Box through one's own thoughts and memories. The Artist reveals the joys and tragedies of life, things the lesser enlightened would never notice, by using the metaphors within the observer's own experience. The effect is extraordinary."

The Box represented the return to the clandestine spaces where art began: the darkest reaches of caves where secrets of the universe were the exclusive domain of a select few. But, Academy professors told us, the intimate connection Artists created through the Box was far too personal to be of any use for the rest of society. Such individual experiences were even considered dangerous by some of the Artworld's harshest critics—jealous scientists and technologists too analytically-minded to understand—and so the State mandated the Assessment.

The Assessment was the State's answer to the annoying inconsistencies of individual Art interpretation. I spent thousands of hours listening to the droning, recorded voice of an anonymous Cognoscente in the dark dormitory as the other students slept. It is a voice I still hear in the back of my subconscious, exactly as I did the night before my first Assessment:

*"The Assessment is a crucial element to the shared experience of the Artist. To encounter a Box solely for one's own pleasure is a selfish act, a treacherous crime against the benevolent State. The Artist's voice is a communal message to a select group of humanity. The Sublime, the reflection and extolling of perfection and accordingly, of State supremacy, can only be determined by many brilliant minds, not one. Every Box must be followed by an Assessment—the critical dissertation by the Historian upon emotions the Box elicits. How do the images recalled reflect the transcendence of the Artistic mind? What universal forms does it recognize? How do these forms praise and reaffirm the righteousness of the State? Be thorough in your Assessments. Only a keen, discerning mind can recognize the genius of an Artist."*

One night I couldn't sleep and I stayed awake long enough to hear the recording shut itself off. I drifted in and out of a doze and dreamed of Dominique. She talked to me for the first and only time since the last Saturday I saw her. She spoke of screaming daffodils.

The Warden stops at the end of the corridor in front of what appears to be a blank wall. He holds up a tightly-gloved hand and the wall disappears to reveal an anteroom inside of which I can see a small black cube about 30 cm square upon a white table. Beyond that I can see a darkened Box doorway. The Warden turns to me and speaks as if to an audience.

"Prisoner # 7800921-247, Alexis Marolean," he begins, with a voice like the humming lights, "has been sentenced on this seventeenth day of the fifth month of 2252 to death by viewing the Cipher Box." He crosses his hands behind his back, perhaps thinking the expansion of his chest gives me a better view of the blue Ministry stripes over his heart. Seemingly abashed by my indifferent attitude to his authority, the Warden looks me in the eye and lowers his voice. "I trust you understand the reasoning for this sentence, as well as the events that have been carried out?"

"You mean my complete eradication as a citizen of the State?" I ask.

"Correction: your complete eradication as a human being," the Warden replies. I nod.

"As you have been informed, there will be no Assessment of the Cipher Box; no one living has seen it, and your death ensures its continued secrecy. You have come here of your own volition and upon exiting the piece you will, of your own accord, open the lid of that receptacle and place your hand inside." He glances briefly at the peculiar cube on the table. "It will end your life quickly, painlessly, and without any aggression by the State."

"Can I ask what it does?"

"It will end your life quickly, painlessly, and without any aggression by the State," he repeats, tightening his gray lips.

A hot tension erupts over my skin. It is so incredibly forceful I can imagine it setting the stale molecules of air around me into motion for the first time in decades; millions of tiny universes charged into direct collision courses.

My genes never lied. I had the mind of a scientist, I knew, even if Mother tried to deny it from me. I could never ignore my love of the laws and patterns in the natural world—those that ruled both the Arts and the sciences. My only observable defiance of Academy rules came in the form of illegal scientific readings during sleep hours in the dormitory. As the hypnotic voice droned on about Assessments, I would hold my small, lighted computer under the covers and pour over the latest starship schematics or galactic

discoveries posted on scientific journals over the global information databases. I hoarded the knowledge in the back of my mind, thinking someday I might be able to use it, if only for the sheer pleasure of knowing. It evolved into a minor addiction and a fiercely guarded secret like my inner conversations with Dominique. Getting caught was a constant fear, however. As far as the Academy was concerned, I might as well have been looking at pornography. I could have been expelled.

I enjoyed my last concealed study a few weeks ago, the night before my Final Assessment. The article I read discussed black holes. Their existence intrigued me; their strength and gravitational pull sending waves through the curve of the universe like ripples in a pond. I downloaded a vivid hologram of a new black hole just discovered a few short light years away. It swirled slowly in space, a brown spiral rotating in a disk of luminous dust. It was beautiful. I held my breath as I watched it.

After shutting off the computer, I watched blue swirls of bright, black holes play in the space of darkness before my eyes. They throbbed, simplified, and faded away.

The museum in which I had my Final Assessment had the best Art collection on Earth. It exhibited only the most highly esteemed and challenging of all Boxes and had been chosen by senior M. Cgns. as the space to conclude my academic career.

I met my mentor Aesthetician, Cgn. Kirana, in the west wing of the museum. She reminded me to relax, that today's examination was like hundreds before. Of course it was. I tried to calm myself by thinking of Dominique and the dream from the night before: Dom in the greenhouse, surrounded by blue swirls of light.

The examiners stood up from their seats in the center of the room as Kirana and I entered. Cognoscentes Moly, Lockett, and Alician, with whom I had studied at the Academy were there, as well as Magna Cognoscentes Foren and Omm, perhaps the only Historians more well known than Mother. I was glad she wasn't here. The Academy barred any family members from witnessing one's Final.

"Salutations, Alexis," Cgn. Lockett said, "We are all excited to hear your Assessment this afternoon. Naturally we're familiar with your work at the Academy—brilliant, like your mother's." Several of the others nodded in agreement.

"The praise is to the State," I replied, trying to hold back the tremor in my voice, "I hope today proves to be my most enlightened evaluation."

"Indeed we shall see," the Cgn. answered, "Let us commence with the examination."

They seated themselves again in the plush, white chairs of the examination room. Kirana indicated to me where I should sit so I could listen to the introductory address which Cgn. Moly stood up to give.

"Gathered colleagues," she began in the rich tones of a voice not unlike Mother's. "We are here today to witness a most spectacular revelation. I'm assured you are all as excited as I about the potential for interpretive genius to take place this afternoon. Rather amazing isn't it? While contemplating this very event a few days ago, I was reminded how fortunate the State is indeed to have such brilliant minds as Alexis' that will lead us boldly into the next generation of Historians. I have no doubt that he is destined for such greatness as his esteemed mother, Soren. . ."

My mind drifted. The comparison to my mother was inevitable; there hadn't been a day at the Academy when I didn't hear it. I looked at the ground and remembered Father's empty speech fifteen years ago, explaining how Dominique wouldn't arrive Saturday morning.

"...represent an advancement in our own evolution. For as we know, Art in its purest form—the concept within the Artist's mind—is the simplest and most profound of human faculties. It is the essential forms of the universe, and it is our duty to preserve them for our species, for all humanity."

Brief applause. Historians, reveling in their significance to the course of human evolution. Moly glances at me. *you switched! (tenses that is)*

"Well, enough about formalities, I know we're anxious to get to the point of all of this." Her eyes rarely blinked. They were two circles frozen within the ridges of her face, two staring holes. "It is now time for our most distinguished guest, M. Cgn. Omm, to discuss the examination piece." The thin woman nodded at the M. Cgn, indicating his turn, and took her seat. *never mind...*

Omm stood up slowly, the weight of humanity on his shoulders. He took his place before the group and began speaking in a deep baritone:

"Distinguished Historians, we are an exclusive lot, aren't we? You know, I was just speaking to one of my scientist friends this morning, telling her, of this very Assessment: I said, 'Can you imagine the excitement the Aesthetic world is feeling today?' and you know what she said, the poor dear? 'Imagine? Excitement? Feeling? Please explain.'" The distinguished group laughed. An insult to the left-brained world was always appreciated.

"But in earnest, my friends, today is a milestone in the annals of Historian craft. We have among us without question the finest young mind produced for Aesthetic study: Alexis, son of our own illustrious M. Cgn. Soren Marcolean. But we are also honored today to have with us a most unique work of Art for Alexis to experience. The Artist our student has yet to discover has never before been exhibited, never yet been discussed, and certainly never been under the scrutiny of an Assessment outside the Commune. I myself have not even seen the work, yet had the highest assurance by Commune directors that this is the most outstanding work they've ever seen." Omm stopped, allowing the last echoes of his great baritone to hang in the air, echo, and fade.

"Alexis Marcolean: you may now enter Box'107 to make an Assessment of the work. I trust we shall not be disappointed." M. Cgn. Omm sat down as Kirana indicated to me that it was time to enter the Box. I stood up deliberately and made my way to its entrance, the black doorway within the blank wall the Historians sat facing.

It's a Box, I reminded myself, like thousands I've entered before.

I swallowed silently and walked several feet into the dark room. Allowing my feet to guide me, I knew the measured steps required to take me into the exact center of the isolated chamber. I concentrated on the cold brightness behind my eyelids and stopped pacing. I gave the room a moment to recognize my presence and illuminate, then opened my eyes.

The room was blue. Entirely blue. I had never seen a Box interior any color other than white, and fear grasped me for half a second as I wondered if there had been a mistake. Then the room began to melt; cerulean corners convening together, the ceiling arching around to connect, the floor stretching out from under

to encapsulate me entirely in a glowing blue light. I was floating in clear sky. Flying. I couldn't feel my feet on the floor, nor could I sense the enclosure of walls. I was simply there in blue space. It was magnificent.

I had the instinct to close my eyes again, to begin the dream sequence, but I could not block out the intense blue, didn't want to lose it from my sight. I rolled forward in space, swimming in thin air, yet was certain that I somehow remained stationed in the center of the Box. I had no point of reference and couldn't see anything but serene blueness so I couldn't tell if I really were moving. The sensation was terrible and wonderful at the same time. I had no idea whether I were falling, rising, or moving to the side, except somehow I knew I was flying.

Then I was in Father's greenhouse, had floated out of the sky to land gently on the hybrid grass. Dominique was there, just as I pictured her—forever six years old. She was pulling up handfuls of daisies. It wasn't a scene I could remember.

"Dominique," I yelled, not certain if I were talking out loud or within the dream, "What are you doing? Can't you hear the flowers?"

"This glass box has deafened me," she answered. Holding out the daisies to me and looking in complete earnest, she said in almost a whisper, "There remains within you a place where the light still escapes."

I couldn't reply. Both Dominique and the daisies disappeared. The air around me condensed and grew heavy with strange humidity. I was in the blue void again, and a force like gravity pulled me in all directions. I panicked, fighting frantically against the black fuzz in my eyes, the blood receding from my head. I tried to stabilize myself and then opened my eyes, hoping the nausea would pass.

The blueness faded then, or perhaps it was my fatigue of vision. My body ached. As I wiped my brow, the room darkened and I felt the firm wooden floor once again under my feet. The Box had finished. I walked out of the room with my head feeling too heavy to lift, my throat burning. The bright lights of the examination room were a shock like daylight to one who had crawled out from the depths of the earth.

For the first time before the assembled Historians, I didn't know what to do or say. There before me were the most intelligent minds alive and I was speechless. They blinked in unison, waiting. I gasped and swallowed. After several agonizing moments—each one exponentially diminishing my performance—I forced a beginning: "In this Box I found. . . That is, I ~~see~~" *saw?*

I stopped, fumbled. A chill within me was a steady vibration—the constant, high frequency pulse of a defective computer, the undulating waves of gravity. "It would appear that the Artist in this piece. . ."

Kirana saw my struggle and tried to help, "What was the revelation, Alexis?"

"I found—" I looked to my feet. No inspiration. My head shot up, and before I could stop myself I blurted out:

"Nothing." It was out as if someone else had said it.

Silence. Then: "What?"

Eyes boring into me in accusation, disgust, fear. Again: "What did you say?"

I could have saved myself and said that the Artist was taking a new approach in the use of color. I could have said that the expanse of blue reflected the clarity and keen perception with which the State determined the lives of its constituents. I could have said the allusion to nature was an affirmation of the



natural laws dictating the need for harmony and order and the nostalgia I felt was not a longing for childhood, but for the communal love of duty and tradition provided by the State. I could have said any one of those things, but I didn't. Dominique's image denied a standard Assessment response.

"I saw nothing."

Kirana stumbled to save me. "I'm sure what Alexis means—what he means to say is that he has made a tremendous error, that he is for the moment completely taken by the piece and requires a moment to articulate his thoughts. Am I right, Alexis?"

"No," I replied, "I simply—" I had to say it, "I saw a void."

"This is blasphemous!" M. Cgn. Foren yelled, "This is a mistake of profound proportions and I think you realize that, Alexis Marcolean. You will promptly rescind this criminal lunacy before I have you stripped entirely of your Academy status and reduced to the level of a Drone! Save your career and your dignity and speak some sense. Now!"

"I will rescind nothing."

M. Cgn. Omm screamed for security guards. Chaos erupted. Shouts and orders: "*Seize this criminal!*" I was numb, standing solidly and watching Omm and the others pointing and accusing with ferocious eyes. Kirana glaring. I was an insect, an abomination.

The sharp binding of a security hold broke me from the numbness. The guards were on me, their gray suits blocking my vision, a tranquilizer gun providing me with blessed darkness.

The Warden's gray gaze judges my face, probes my fear.

"No one will be in this room when you emerge from the Cipher Box," he continues, "The State will not be responsible for your death. You, as a threat to the Public Good, will have been eliminated. This is your sentence. Are you prepared to enter?"

I swallow deliberately, hesitating. "What if I refuse to kill myself?"

"You won't," the Warden answers bluntly.

"Then let's continue," I say. My face is cold and as I blink, the negative space of the room pulses behind my eyelids.

The Warden leads me to the darkened doorway and watches me enter. The dim flouresents light up the moment I step inside. They are an intense, constant drone.

Two weeks was an interminably long prison stay after a sentencing. At first I figured it might have been Mother's intervention—a last effort to save me with her influence. But this was a delusion. She knew the justice of my punishment as I did. My situation would have been less damming if I had I pulled a weapon after emerging from the Box and killed every Aesthetician present. At least then I could have said the Box had influenced me. It might not have been far from the truth.

I had never heard of anyone sentenced to death, and when the final verdict came to me through a message from the Warden, a man who never met my eyes and spoke in a monotonous staccato, I could scarcely believe it.

"Prisoner 7800921-247, Alexis Marolean has been sentenced to die by the Cipher Box. Execution will take place on day fifty-two-five dash seventeen. All hail the State."

With heels clicking, he turned and left. I jumped from the bed on which I sat and ran to edge of my cell. "What's the Cipher Box?" I yelled after him, but he was gone.

I scavenged my mind, trying to remember some shred of a memory, some clue as to what I might soon face. Nothing in my Academy training had ever mentioned a Box as a form of execution. I fell back into the greenhouse with Dominique and asked her. She was silent.

I couldn't remember my dream that night. I slept in the comfort of black space.

The humming lights are loud. They have been here too long with little or no maintenance. I smell the room. It is dry. My eyes open and I see an object.

Directly in front of me across the three meter floor is an installation mounted to the wall. It looks like a rectangular box lacking two sides—the one against the wall and the one I am facing—to produce a deep frame of exquisite dark wood about one by one-half meters in size. This is unlike any Box I have ever seen or heard about. I have no idea what I should to do.

Before I can decide, images begin to appear. I'm frozen in place as the random thoughts surface. I don't think they are mine. They feel old, like this room. A date comes to me: 2158, almost one hundred years ago. Am I reading someone else's mind? Suddenly a flood of information nearly topples my balance.

An Artist. Cipher. Male or female? Doesn't matter. Built this Box. Alone. Years before. I see the Artist Communes. They are peaceful, contained. Is Dominique there? I feel the understanding of the essential forms. They are everywhere stretching out before me like constellations. I'm standing in air, watching the rotations, geometry, symmetry, law, cause and effect—physical things that construct the universe—surrounding me, like fireflies or the cotton of dandelion seeds. And there is the chaos—the brief pits of disorder, the black holes. Then everything around me disappears to blackness. It is cold. The room is gone and I stand in space.

Dominique appears. She is my age now and beautiful. ~~I can't speak.~~ She approaches me. I want to touch her skin.

"Is it you, Dom?"

She looks at me blankly, ~~not hearing.~~ She shows me how this Box came to be here. "Cipher" was the designation for the Artist who had lost his mind one hundred years ago. It meant nothing, zero. He was considered the greatest Artist of his time. The scant group of current Aestheticians who knew of him but could never mention the name still regarded him as the quintessential genius.

Cipher had escaped from the Commune and somehow made his way to this museum, the most magnificent edifice in existence then. He locked himself in here, threatening to take his own life if anyone interrupted his work or tried to take him away. The Aestheticians were intrigued and allowed him to finish the masterpiece. For three weeks he stayed here, and on the last day he stumbled out the front entrance, tumbled down the magnificent steps bleeding from every limb, raving about the creation to save humanity.

The first Historians who dared to enter the Box in which Cipher had worked—and there were several brave enough to try—went mad and committed suicide immediately afterwards. None of them spoke a word of what the Box contained or what they had experienced; they simply walked away and disappeared, invariably found dead within the following days. Hundreds of Historians gathered to discuss what to do, and finally a scientist was sent in to investigate. He reported seeing some strange reflecting invention and nothing more. The Aestheticians were perplexed, but in refusing to admit their inability to explain the phenomenon, they denied the existence of the Box and the Artist who devised it. Guarded by the Ministry as a State secret, it became an effective means of execution for renegade Aestheticians. No one could be held responsible for their deaths; they merely disappeared, permanently silenced.

Dom looks away and is gone. The solidity of the room returns along with the dull buzz of the lights. I am alone again, facing the dark object on the wall Cipher has left for me. I walk up to it. Only when I'm a few steps away do I notice something moving inside. It's hard to see with these dim, green lights, but—it's me. I'm in the frame. Or rather, it's some crude, two-dimensional representation of me. I wave my hand in front of my face. My replication waves back, exactly in the same fashion. I know what this is. I've seen it before. It is an ancient mirror.

When I was younger, before the Academy, I sometimes traveled with my mother to the Drone colonies. The one in Alaska I remember because of the cold. Mother had an eye for antiques and loved to hunt for artifacts to show off to her friends. She was daring, too, to be there among the Drones. It could have been dangerous, especially with me.

The black flies of summer buzzed and plagued me all day. Batting them away I glimpsed, in the corner of my vision, the chubby legs moving alongside me. They weren't my legs, though; they walked within a frame, flattened out without the realness of a holoivid. "What is it, Mother? Can I touch it?" I tugged her arm, but she didn't listen to me. I walked up to it and squatted down to stare at myself.

I touched the mirror's smooth, silver surface as I'm doing now. This close, I behold myself fully in all of the mirror's beautiful flatness. Its silver is recessed within the deep frame, the rectangular box lacking two sides. It has a delicacy to its strange warp and how it is preserved here in the dustless Box forever. I am looking at myself.

The two weeks in prison have drawn my face down, and I look twenty years older. Or perhaps its the lighting, casting faint shadows down my cheeks and describing all the minuscule imperfections on my skin's surface. There's a small circular depression on my right temple I don't remember having seen before. I've never been handsome, but this flat reflection washes my eyes and hair completely of color. Mother's brow is especially harsh; though it usually gives me the appearance of deep thought, here it is merely weight. Even the curved line of Father's jaw and the thickness of my nose does little to soften my expression. My pupils are black and round.

I want to speak to Dominique again, but I sense her absence as I never have before. It is like death. Then I see the brass plate.

Nestled along the center of the frame, leaning up against the mirror as on ancient paintings once displayed in museums, is a word engraved in brass. A title. I see it, read it, look again at my face.

art  
never  
saw it!

I turn away from the piece and exit the room. The anteroom is empty, as promised. I see the small black box is still on the table as before. I approach it, open its top flap in a slow, deliberate motion. There is blue inside, a void of warm, comforting light with an ambiance as if surrounded by light dust. I place my right hand within and close my eyes.

do you want to capitalize Art &  
Artist? Sometimes you do, sometimes  
you don't.

Something happens?

Is this part of a previous work?

I loved it. You write so well.

The way you can shift between  
present and past - and only make  
one mistake is wonderful!

More.. more..

Bravo! Bravo! ☺

Angela Smith

April 16, 1998  
The Cipher Box

The Warden's gray trousers make an efficient zip, zip as he escorts Alexis down the museum corridor. The building walls reveal a century of neglect as does the stale air, thick with a stagnant heaviness from the weight of decades. The vacant Box rooms which once held the greatest Art of the State pass quickly; a line of repeated blank squares like windows on the subway transport. Alexis glimpses into them and sees nothing. The lighting is ghastly green; the ambient luminens had burnt out long ago and were replaced by cheaper fluorescent lights. Their high frequency buzz and slight strobe is hypnotic, although their radiance makes the hallway unnaturally crisp.

Since early childhood, Alexis Marcolean knew his life was destined for the study of Aesthetics. His training began at age four with great impetus from his mother, the famed Magna Cognoscentia Soren Marcolean, who in that era was at the peak of her career as an Aesthetician. Her gala parties in their ~~impressive~~ home attracted an array of the State's most enlightened Ministers, Art Historians, and other members of the Aesthetic elite. Their faces were anonymous to Alexis; ambiguously thin and blurry like watercolors. Even at his young age, Alexis ~~recognized~~ <sup>felt, sensed</sup> the importance of these people, but ~~it wasn't until~~ <sup>he wouldn't discover</sup> much later that ~~he understood they came to Mother's parties merely to praise each other and bask in their own brilliance.~~ <sup>their presence at as well</sup> For him, the house was a place to look and appreciate, <sup>but as a child he was not</sup> but never to touch or speak. At least not without direction.

"Come, dear Alexis," Mother would say, placing him on a tall, rectangular banister of the grand staircase so the ocean of peering eyes could see him. "Recite for us the Historian's Creed."

Such a display <sup>at the gala events</sup> was not unusual. Alexis would oblige dutifully and respectfully.

<sup>yet</sup> "We the Art Historians are the leaders of a necessary elite," he would say, his voice <sup>attempting authority</sup> cracking as it fell upon those shining, upturned faces. "We possess the knowledge of the greatest of human abilities: discernment of the natural essence and beauty elucidated by Aesthetics. We seek the shared experience of the Artist, the journey into the obscurity of human thought conveyed through emotions that transcend time and space. We recognize, codify, and evaluate for the greater perfection of humanity the nature of the universe. We are the interpreters of genius and the sole protectors of universal forms. We are the purveyors of Truth."

Cheers and cries of bravo! bravo! Soren beams at her young son, the prodigy. His returned smile is brief and self-conscious.

Dominique was Alexis' sole childhood friend. Their fathers had been colleagues for a number of years ~~as they were~~ both botanists working at the same BioLab near the city. Soren relished the fact that Alexis could associate with a future Artist at such a young age and arranged for the two to play together every Saturday morning in her husband's greenhouse. Dominique's favorite activity was to lie on her back upon a square of hybrid grasses and stare through the transparent roof at the sky. Once, Alexis plucked one of his father's daffodils for her, but Dominique covered her ears in pain.

"What's wrong, Dominique? I thought you liked flowers."

"They scream when you pluck them, Alexis," she replied, "It hurts my head."

Their conversations revolved around a dream to fly away and explore the outside world of which they had only seen glimpses—brief flashes of limitless air and horizons that shimmered in their memories. They maintained an unspoken agreement never to discuss the confinement of their small lives, nor the impending break in their friendship which they both felt only vaguely, like an oncoming hollowness. They knew their genes had betrayed them before birth, but when it happened, Alexis wasn't ready. He hadn't been warned of the date

<sup>still unprepared</sup>  
taken by surprise.

\* this importance  
balanced  
on their  
presence +  
exposure  
at Mother's  
parties

2

Assessment

Dominique was to be taken to the Artist Communes, and so the following Saturday he patiently waited in his room for the house servant to show her in. She never appeared. Soren was gone again on a speaking tour, so Alexis asked his father where she might be. He answered with a straight face in the soft, logical voice he used to explain his genetic regeneration experiments.

"Dominique has gone to the Commune, Alexis. She is to be an Artist and must be in the company of other people who can teach her to understand her genius. We must accept this and be happy that the State is sensitive to the needs of all of its citizens, especially its Artists."

Alexis' own genetic <sup>charms</sup> blueprint predestined him to the work of a scientist or technologist. But Soren wouldn't be shamed so easily. As a result of her influences, just before birth Alexis had been upgraded to become an Historian like her, and shortly after Dominique's departure, Alexis was sent to the University of Aesthetic Studies.

Over the next fifteen years, Alexis learned everything known and knowable, thought, and written about Art history, the essential forms, the Aesthetic revelation of genius and its support of State supremacy. His days filled with discussions, seminars, and lectures over the New Enlightenment of the past century, the shift from economic to intellectual advancement of cultures, the Genetic Revolution, the Pax Aestheticus and creation of the world State and intellectual caste society. History, it seemed, had proven to the world the superiority of the Artist over science, technology and all other schools of thought. The University, the center of Art appreciation, almost convinced Alexis that becoming a great Historian like his mother was everything the State said it was: an essential service to humanity to further advance the human mind and spirit toward perfection. He abandoned himself to academics and quickly emerged as one of the top minds of his class.

"Alexis, you are a true genius!" professors would exclaim, "You represent the future of our honored craft. You are wonderful, brilliant—the image of Soren. Will you be taking my class next term?"

As diligent as Alexis <sup>proved himself to be</sup> <sup>gradually</sup> <sup>mounting</sup> <sup>leave</sup> <sup>however</sup> <sup>doubtful he</sup> <sup>might have</sup> <sup>felt</sup> felt, in time his University experience fell short of expectation. While he was initially satisfied merely to gain the approval of his professors, he eventually became frustrated and anxious. At first he thought it was the build-up of assignments; the University's reputation rested greatly on the fact that many students would drop out or be ejected simply because they could not withstand the rigor and intensity of classes. <sup>in study</sup> <sup>his</sup> <sup>but it was</sup> But the insistence of his intellectual fatigue soon made him question the purpose of his academic training—something other students, in their bland conformity, never considered. Only so many individuals <sup>could ascend to be</sup> <sup>one of them.</sup> could become Historians, the University said, and Alexis was determined to be one of them. Assuming this new weariness was yet another test of his perseverance, he focused himself to a near obsession.

The distraction continued as he grew older, however, and one particular image began to haunt him: Dominique, lying on her back in the greenhouse, staring at the sky with lids half-closed and her hands crossed over her chest. She was still his sole confidante, although in his mind she never spoke. He wished to fly again and wanted a return to the simplicity of his life before it had become so dense and uncomfortable. Sometimes he spoke to Dominique aloud, not realizing it until he noticed the curious stares. Other students at the University avoided him—some knew he didn't really belong and of the others, he wasn't sure. Assuming they were intimidated by his studiousness, he tried to ignore them. His mother was the only person who spoke to him outside classes during that time, only to pressure and reassure him: "This is your calling, Alexis."

<sup>And of course there were the Boxes.</sup>  
A calling to what, he wanted to ask.

And of course there were the Boxes.

"The Box is the sublime experience," the Magna Cognoscentes would say, "An artistic voyage in complete isolation. No more the flat dullness of pictures or the immobility of objects. The Box contains the essence of pure, Artistic thought—the manifestation of truth."

Alexis' first Box experience was at age twelve. With six years of study already, he was somewhat skeptical of the power the Boxes allegedly contained. Having read a great deal about the theory of Boxes, the esteem with which they were held in the Artworld, and their

importance in perpetuating the truths of the State, he didn't anticipate any surprises in that first viewing. He couldn't have been more unprepared.

The Boxes themselves were separate rooms within the long hallways of museums. On the day of his first viewing, Alexis stepped into his assigned Box, one in a line of many darkened chambers. It brightened immediately as he reached the center to reveal a seven meter square floor, pristine white walls and no windows. Alexis was slightly taken aback; he had always assumed from various readings that there would be installations of some sort inside—perhaps something physical made in the manner of Artists from ages ago. But there was nothing at all.

After a few moments of impatience, the Box experience began. The fuzzy weight of sleep relaxed him, and Alexis dreamed of his first oral examination at the University. Having been so anxious and afraid of failure that day, he had made himself sick. But here in the Box he felt quite calm and watched his dreamself with an <sup>assured</sup> sense of confidence. While the massive classroom stretched before him—their glassy eyes staring, the Magna Cognoscente and his drilling questions about the discourse of Artists, the utopia of the State—Alexis felt splendid, especially as the image of his younger self began to prevail over the examination. But nearly as quickly as it began, the blurry, distant vision disappeared and left Alexis alone again in the empty room. He felt very content for a moment afterward, and then dizzy and confused as he questioned whether the experience had been real.

theory  
observe  
experiment  
analyze  
conclude

"Whatever the Artist wishes the Historian to experience—the lessons of failure, the necessity of war, the infiniteness of the universe—" M. Cgn. Lux explained, "<sup>will</sup> can be brought to mind in the Box through one's own thoughts and memories. The Artist reveals the joys and successes of life, things the lesser enlightened can never fully appreciate, by using the metaphors within the observer's own experience. The effect is marvelous."

The Box itself represented a return to the clandestine spaces where art began: the darkest reaches of caves where <sup>the</sup> secrets of the universe were the exclusive domain of a select group. But, University professors insisted, the intimate connection Artists created in the Box was far too personal to be of use for the rest of society. Individuals' emotions were even considered dangerous by some of the Artworld's harshest critics—the few scientists and Ministers who occasionally delved into Aesthetic affairs—and so the State mandated the Assessment.

The Assessment was a solution to the annoying inconsistencies of individual Art interpretation. Alexis had spent thousands of hours listening to the droning, recorded voice of an anonymous Cognoscente in the dark dormitory as other students slept. It was a voice he heard occasionally in his deepest subconscious, barely audible over the pulsing sound of blood through his brain:

The Assessment is a crucial element to the shared experience of the Artist. To encounter a Box solely for one's own pleasure is a selfish act, a treacherous crime against the benevolent State. The Artist's voice is a communal message to a select group of humanity. The Sublime, the reflection and extolling of perfection and accordingly, of State supremacy, can only be determined by many brilliant minds, not one. Every Box must be followed by an Assessment. It is the critical dissertation by the Historian upon images the Box recalls. How do the images <sup>recall</sup> reflect the transcendence of the Artistic mind? What universal forms do <sup>they</sup> recognize? How do <sup>again do they</sup> these forms praise and reaffirm the righteousness of the State? Be <sup>thorough</sup> thorough in your Assessments. Only a keen, discerning mind can recognize the genius of an Artist. <sup>Assessments must be thorough and succinct.</sup>

we must  
ask and  
explore

One night Alexis couldn't sleep. He stayed awake long enough to hear the recording shut itself off and drifted in and out of a doze, dreaming of Dominique. She talked to him for the first and only time since the last Saturday he had seen her. She spoke of screaming flowers.

The Warden stops at the end of the corridor in front of what appears to be a blank wall. He holds up a tightly-gloved hand, and the wall vanishes to reveal an anteroom inside of

\* It ~~was~~ jumped about in the depths of his subconscious, like, and elusive thought on the elusive, indeterminate path of an electron.

which Alexis can see a small black cube about 30 cm square upon a white table. Beyond that is the darkened doorway of a Box. The Warden turns to him and speaks ~~as if to an audience~~. *an leave*

"Prisoner Alexis Marcolean," he begins, with a voice like the buzzing lights, "has been sentenced on this seventeenth day of the fifth month of this year to death by viewing the Cipher Box." He crosses his hands behind his back, thinking perhaps that the expansion of his chest gives Alexis a better view of the blue Ministry stripes over his heart. Seemingly abashed by the prisoner's indifferent attitude to his authority, the Warden looks him in the eye and lowers his voice. "I trust you understand the reasoning for this sentencing, as well as the events that have been carried out?"

"You mean my complete eradication as a citizen of the State?" Alexis asks.

"Correction: your complete eradication as a human being," the Warden replies. Alexis nods.

"As you have been informed, there will be no Assessment of the Cipher Box; no one living has seen it, and your death ensures its continued secrecy. Your acceptance to view the Box was of your own volition, and upon exiting the piece you will, of your own accord, open the lid of that receptacle and place your hand inside." He motions briefly at the peculiar cube on the table. "It will end your life quickly, painlessly, and without any aggression by the State."

"May I ask what it does, exactly?"

"It will end your life quickly, painlessly, and without any aggression by the State," he repeats, tightening his gray lips.

A hot tension erupts over Alexis' skin. It is so forceful it energizes the stale molecules of air around him into motion for the first time in a century; millions of infinitesimal universes colliding at once. Alexis is suddenly reminded of the fear he harbored during his academic career that his one observable deviance from strict University rules—the illegal scientific readings during dormitory sleep hours—would someday be discovered.

Every other night, as the hypnotic voice carried on about Assessments and the sublime, Alexis held a small, lighted computer under his bedcovers and poured over the latest galactic discoveries posted on scientific journals and global information databases. He knew his genes had never lied; he truly had the mind of a scientist. His respect for the laws of gravity, the power of light and its infinite travels through the universe, and even for the microcosm of plants and insects of his father's greenhouse reflected his love of the search for universal patterns in Art. But it was more than this. Alexis sensed something lacking in the objective rhetoric of the University and in scientific theorems to explain his fascination with the magic of life and design he found both in Art and science. *fleeing*  
~~He wanted to fill the empty dialogue of Aesthetics with his own language; his unspoken emotions and memories of Dominique. But he couldn't. No one could understand his passionate need to know, to feel, and to remember. He therefore continued to hoard scientific knowledge in the back of his mind, allowing the nighttime studies to become a minor addiction—a small vice like the fiercely guarded conversations with Dominique.~~ *A thought for perhaps said even more*  
*He was, however a*

Alexis enjoyed his last concealed study the night before his Final Assessment. He had read an article on black holes frantically, absorbing every detail. Their existence intrigued him; their strength and gravitational pull sending waves through the curve of the universe like ripples in a pond. After downloading a vivid hologram of a new black hole just discovered a few light years away, Alexis held his breath as he watched it swirl slowly in space, a brown spiral rotating in a disk of luminous dust. It was dazzling, beautiful, and empty. Even after shutting off the computer he could watch swirls of bright, black holes play in the space of darkness before his eyes. They throbbed slowly: blue, yellow, then red, gradually fading away.

The museum in which Alexis had his Final Assessment held the finest Art collection on Earth, exhibiting only the most highly esteemed and challenging of all Boxes. Senior M. Cgns. at the University decided that such a location was the only fitting conclusion to Alexis' stunning career as a student.

He met his mentor Aesthetician, Cgn. Kirana, in the west wing of the museum. She reminded him to relax—that today's examination was like hundreds before. Alexis tried to



calm himself by thinking of Dominique and the dream from the night before in which she stood in the greenhouse, stretching out her small hands to capture blue swirls of light.

The examiners stood up from their seats in the center of the room as Kirana and Alexis entered. Cognoscentes Moly, Locket, and Alician, with whom Alexis had studied at the University were there, as well as Magna Cognoscentes Schnabe and Omm, perhaps the only Historians more well known than Soren Marcolean. Alexis was suddenly very glad she wasn't present.

"Salutations, Alexis," Cgn. Locket said, "We are all excited to hear your Assessment this afternoon. Naturally we're familiar with your work at the University—brilliant, like your mother's." Several of the others nodded in agreement.

"The praise is to the State," Alexis replied, trying to hold back the tremor in his voice, "I hope today proves to be my most enlightened evaluation."

"Indeed we shall see," the Cognoscente answered, "Let us commence with the Final Assessment."

They seated themselves again in the plush, white chairs of the examination room. Kirana indicated to Alexis where to sit so he could listen to the introductory address which Cgn. Moly stood up to give.

"Gathered colleagues," she began in a pinched, nasal voice, "We are here today to witness a most spectacular revelation. I'm assured you are all as excited as I about the potential for interpretive genius to take place this afternoon. While contemplating this very event a few days ago, I was reminded how fortunate the State is indeed to have such brilliant minds as Alexis' that will lead us boldly into the next generation of Historians. I have no doubt that he is destined for such greatness as his esteemed mother. . ."

Alexis' ~~mind~~ <sup>stare slowly</sup> drifted. The comparison to Soren was inevitable; there hadn't been a day at the University when he didn't hear it. He looked at the ground and remembered his father's empty speech fifteen years ago, explaining why Dominique wouldn't arrive Saturday morning.

"...represent an advancement in our own evolution. For as we know, Art in its purest form—the concept within the Artist's mind—is both the simplest and most profound of human faculties. It reveals the laws and patterns of the universe, and it is our duty to preserve them for our species, for all humanity."

Brief applause. The Historians ~~basked~~ <sup>paused for a moment to again ponder</sup> their significance to the course of human evolution. Moly glanced at Alexis.

"Well, enough of formalities, I know we're anxious to begin the Assessment." Her eyes rarely blinked. ~~They were two holes frozen within the ridges of her face.~~ "Now without further delay, our most distinguished guest, M. Cgn. Omm, will discuss the examination piece." The thin woman nodded at the Magna Cognoscente, indicating his turn, and took her seat.

Omm stood up slowly, the weight of humanity on his shoulders. He took his place before the group and began speaking in a deep baritone:

"Distinguished Historians, we are an exclusive lot aren't we? You know, I was just speaking to one of my scientist friends this morning, telling her of this very Assessment. I said, 'Can you imagine the excitement the Aesthetic world is feeling today?' and you know what she said, the poor dear? 'Excitement? Feeling? What are you talking about?'" The Aestheticians ~~laughed.~~ <sup>shared a chuckle</sup>

"But in earnest my friends, today is a milestone in the annals of Historian craft. We have among us without question the finest young mind produced for Aesthetic study: Alexis, son of our own illustrious M. Cgn. Soren Marcolean. But we are also honored today to have with us a most unique work of Art for Alexis to experience. The Artist our student has yet to discover has never before exhibited, never yet been discussed, and certainly never fallen under the scrutiny of an Assessment outside the Commune. I myself have not even seen the work, yet had the highest assurance by Commune directors that it is the most outstanding work they've ever seen." Omm stopped, allowing the last echoes of his great baritone to hang in the air, echo, and fade.

"Alexis Marcolean: you may now enter Box 107 to make an Assessment of the work. I trust we shall not be disappointed." M. Cgn. Omm took his seat as Kirana indicated to Alexis

that it was time to enter the Box. He stood up deliberately and walked slowly to its entrance, the black doorway within the wall the seated Historians faced.

It's a Box, he reminded himself, like the multitudes encountered before.

Swallowing silently, he continued into the dark room. With his feet as a guide, he knew the measured steps required to the exact center of the isolated chamber. He concentrated on the cold brightness behind his eyelids and stopped pacing. Allowing the room a moment to recognize his presence and illuminate, Alexis opened his eyes.

The room was blue. Entirely blue. Alexis had never seen a Box interior any color other than white, and the change caused him to hesitate for a moment. Then the room began to melt; its corners convened together, the ceiling arched around to connect, and the floor stretched out from under his feet to encapsulate him entirely in a glowing blue light and suspend him in clear sky. Having neither the floor nor the enclosure of walls, he simply hovered in blue space, a spring morning stretching on forever. He rolled forward, swimming in the spacious air, unsure if he was still stationed in the center of the Box. The sensation was unusual but not unpleasant.

He then stood in his father's greenhouse. Dominique was there just as she existed in his mind, forever six years old. Sitting cross-legged amid the hybrid grasses and flowers, she looked up at Alexis with dark, melancholy eyes and plucked a flower for him.

"Dominique," he said, not certain if he spoke aloud or inside his mind, "What are you doing?"

The young girl looked at him blankly, remaining mute. Her eyes reflected no light. As she held up the flower, her image paused strangely for an instant, and for a fleeting second Alexis thought she was real. He convinced himself, vainly and hopefully, that the fifteen years between them were merely confused fantasy. Then he realized she was real. This was her Box. He knew it as surely as if her child image had told him. He blinked and the image was gone.

The air around him condensed. He was in the blue void again, and a force like gravity gently tugged him, pulling him forward as he closed his eyes, thinking of Dominique and trying to imagine himself within her mind. But she was outside of him, directing him through the Box as if to some destination. Alexis opened his eyes, looking for a horizon, wanting to see her again.

"Dominique!" he called into the space, but caught his words at once. Still floating, he looked about him, intuitively aware of some significant change. Dominique had disappeared completely, leaving a deep, resonating absence. Alexis ~~then~~ felt indignation—a sickening sense that he had somehow been cheated. And suddenly, just beyond the edge of his consciousness, he sensed it: a latent, insidious blankness.

"No," he whispered, but the Box had finished. With his feet planted firmly on the wooden floor once again, he stood in the center of the now darkening Box and gathered his senses. His legs were unstable, yet he managed to turn and exit the room. His throat burned and his head was nearly too heavy to lift. The bright lights of the examination room were a shock like daylight, as unbelievably dazzling as the sun.

For the first time before the assembled Historians, Alexis wasn't certain what to say. The Aestheticians blinked in unison, waiting. Alexis gasped and swallowed. After several agonizing moments—each one ~~exponentially~~ diminishing his performance—he forced a beginning: "In the course of my studies I have never—" ~~he stopped~~

He stopped, fumbled. An ebbing sound ~~circled him~~ with a steady vibration, the nearly imperceptible hum of the room's atmosphere controls. "It would appear that the Artist in this piece. . ."

Kirana saw his struggle and tried to help, "What was the revelation, Alexis?"

"I found—" he looked to his feet. Inhaling a long, deliberate breath, he closed his eyes and remembered the feeling of Dominique around him, outside of him. The confusing sense of her vanishing. He couldn't convey this—not to them. ~~Or anyone~~. He wasn't even certain what it had ~~been~~. Suddenly, his head shot up, and before he could stop himself he blurted out:

"Nothing."

Silence. Then: "What?" Eyes bored into him in surprise and fear. "What did you say?" Alexis knew he could have saved himself ~~by saying something expected~~ <sup>even then</sup>. Answers flew through his mind like white flags: that the Artist was taking a new approach in the use of color; that the expanse of blue reflected the clarity and keen perception by which the State determined the lives of its constituents; that the allusion to nature was an affirmation of the natural laws dictating the need for harmony and order; that the nostalgia he felt was not a longing for childhood, but for the communal love of duty and tradition provided by the State. He knew he could have said any one of those things, but he didn't. He couldn't betray himself any longer.

"I saw nothing."

Kirana stumbled to save him. "I'm sure what Alexis means—what he means to say is that he has made a tremendous error, that he is for the moment completely taken by the piece and requires a moment to articulate his thoughts. Am I right, Alexis?"

"No," he replied, "I simply—I saw nothing at all." The words fell slowly from his lips, as ~~he~~ he held each one in turn, ~~questioning its validity~~ <sup>weighing its validity</sup>.

"This is treason," M. Cgn. Schnabe said, reminding Alexis of his authority through the pressure of his voice, "It is a crime of profound proportions and I hope you realize it, Alexis Marcolean. You will promptly rescind this lunacy before I have you stripped entirely of your University status and reduced to the level of a Drone. Save your career and your dignity and speak some sense. Now!"

"I will not rescind my Assessment. I saw nothing," A fever seized Alexis <sup>as he</sup> ~~as he~~ watched M. Cgn. Schnabe stand and summon the guards. ~~As he~~ <sup>set</sup> he stood solidly, watching Omm and the others pointing and accusing with offended glares. There was something about Kirana's face—her uncertainty—that signaled an understanding, but Alexis hadn't the time to focus on it. The sharp binding of a security hold broke his paralysis. The guards wrestled him down. Their putty-colored suits blocked his vision and a tranquilizer gun provided him with the relief of darkness.

The Warden's gray gaze judges Alexis' face and probes his fear.

"No one will be in this room when you emerge from the Cipher Box," he continues, "The State will not be responsible for your death. You, as a threat to the Public Good, will have been eliminated. This is your sentence. Are you prepared to enter?"

Alexis swallows deliberately, hesitating. "What if I refuse to kill myself?"

"No one has ever refused," the Warden answers bluntly.

"Then let's continue." Alexis' face is cold and as he blinks, the negative space of the room pulses behind his eyelids. ~~Elight tugging into nothingness.~~

The Warden leads him to the darkened doorway and watches as he enters. The dim fluorescents light up the moment Alexis steps inside. They blend into an intense, constant drone.

The two weeks <sup>reused</sup> in prison seemed to Alexis the longest expanse of time he could remember. He ~~figured~~ the waiting might have been from his mother's intervention—another effort to save him with her influences. But he knew that was ~~vain hope~~ <sup>ind. trans</sup>. Soren understood the justice of his punishment as much as any of the Aestheticians who had witnessed the crime. Alexis had questioned the value of Art, challenged the authority of the State, and angered University officials. And in the cool solitude of his prison cell, he still wasn't sure why he had done it. It was, for now, enough to have seen Dominique once again.

Alexis had never heard of anyone being sentenced to death, so when news of his execution came in a message through the Warden, a man who never met his eyes, Alexis could scarcely believe it.

"Prisoner Alexis Marcolean has been sentenced to die by the Cipher Box. Execution will take place on ~~day five two five dash~~ <sup>the</sup> ~~seventeen~~ <sup>day of the fifth</sup> ~~This is the final verdict.~~ <sup>month of the current year.</sup>"

*The idea was preposterous*

With heels clicking, he turned and left. Alexis jumped from the bed on which he had been resting and ran to edge of his cell. "~~The Cipher Box~~? What—?" he yelled after him, but the Warden was gone. *lethal*

Alexis scavenged his mind, trying to remember some shred of a memory, some clue as to what he might soon face. Nothing in University training had ever mentioned a Box ~~as a form of execution~~. He lay on his bed for hours contemplating the events of the past few weeks, then quietly escaped into the comfort of dreamless sleep.

*square*

The lights are loud. They have been in existence too long with little or no maintenance. Alexis smells the room. It is dry. His eyes open and he sees an installation mounted to the wall directly before him across the three-meter floor. It looks like a ~~rectangular~~ box lacking two sides—the one against the wall and the one he faces—producing a deep frame of dark wood about one by one-half meters in size. It is unlike any Box Alexis has ever seen or heard about. He has no idea what to do. *it is a century*

*year*

Before he can decide, images appear. They aren't his. They feel old, like this room A ~~date~~ flashes—~~one hundred years~~ ago. Alexis wonders: Am I reading someone else's mind? A flood of information answers him, nearly toppling his balance.

He sees the Artist Communes. They are peaceful and contained. An Artist ~~escape~~ escapes to build this Box. Forms and patterns suddenly surround Alexis, stretching out *circle* before him like luminous stars. He stands in air, watching the rotations, *geometry*, symmetry, law, cause and effect—physical things that construct the universe—around him like fireflies or the cotton of dandelion seeds. And then the chaos—the brief pits of disorder, the black holes. Instantly everything is gone. The vision disappears and Alexis stands in space.

He senses the presence of someone else. He thinks it is ~~Dom~~. *Dom*.

*most beautiful*

"~~Only~~ Dominique?" Another series of images. Someone is in this museum, this ~~most illustrious museum of its time~~. He locks himself in, threatens to take his own life if anyone interrupts the work or forces him away. The Aestheticians are intrigued and allow him to finish the masterpiece. He works for three weeks alone, then stumbles out through the front entrance on the last day, down the ~~many~~ *beautiful* steps, bleeding from every limb. He's raving about the creation to save humanity. Historians come in this room—the few brave enough to try—but go mad. None of them speak of the Box or what it contains or what they experienced. They walk away and vanish from society ~~and soon~~ *and soon* dead within the following days. Hundreds of Historians gather to discuss what to do, and finally a scientist is sent in to investigate. He reports a strange reflecting invention and nothing more. The Aestheticians are perplexed yet refuse to admit their inability to explain. They deny the existence of the Box and the Artist. The Ministry guards it, eventually using it as an effective means of execution for renegade Aestheticians. No one is held responsible for their deaths. They simply disappear, permanently silenced. *It was truly a creation to save humanity—*

*an effective...*

The solidity of the room returns along with the buzz of lights. Alexis is alone again, facing the dark object ~~Cipher Box~~. He approaches it. Only when he is a few steps away does he notice something moving inside. It's hard to see with the dim, green lights, but—it's his face. He is in the frame. Or rather, some crude, two-dimensional representation. He waves his hand before him. The replicated image waves back, exactly in the same fashion. Alexis knows what this is; he has seen it before.

When he was younger, before his University studies, he had traveled a few times with his mother to the Drone colonies. He remembered a very cold colony, a place where they had stayed for several days in a beautiful, sterile apartment. Soren had an eye for antiques and loved to impress her friends with unique artifacts found only in the colonial markets. She was daring to be there among the Drones. It could have been dangerous, especially with Alexis. Intelligent minds were a rare find in the colonies, and a bright, healthy young child would be of incredible value to a Drone. It was for that very reason that Alexis had rarely been outdoors. And the reason he remembered the infrequent sojourns into the outside world so vividly.

Black flies had droned about and plagued him all day. Batting them away he glimpsed, in the corner of his vision, chubby legs moving alongside him. They weren't his legs, though;

*square*

they walked within a frame, flattened out without the realness of a holovid. "What is it, Mother? Can I touch it?" he had asked Soren, tugging her arm, but she was caught up in *an* intense barter with a merchant and shooed him away. He walked up to the object and squatted down to stare at himself. He touched the smooth, silver surface as he does now. This close, he can behold himself fully in all of the beautiful flatness. The silver is recessed within the deep frame, the ~~rectangular box lacking two sides~~. It has a delicacy to its strange warp and how it is preserved here in the dustless Box forever. Alexis looks at himself.

*may be* The time in isolation has drawn his face down, and he appears much older. Or ~~perhaps~~ it ~~is~~ the lighting which casts faint shadows down his cheeks describing all the minuscule imperfections on his greenish skin. He has never been handsome, but this flat reflection washes out his eyes and hair of color and makes the straight brow he inherited from his mother especially sharp. It usually gave the appearance of deep thought, but here it is added weight. Even the curved line of his father's jaw and the thickness of his nose do little to soften his expression. His pupils are black and round.

He wants to speak to Dominique again—wants to see her now, his same age, not the six-year-old girl in his mind. But the room remains vacant, and the slippery silver of the mirror offers no comfort. He hopes to find Dominique in its flat reflection, but he is alone. A panic seizes him:

"Dominique!" He grasps the sides of the wooden frame and, feeling its solidity, watches the grief spread over his face cautiously, unbelieving. The ephemeral blank moment he had experienced in the blue Box returns, but it is stronger now, choking him with the strength of a deep, deep loss. Looking into the flat reflection of himself, Alexis senses Dominique's absence as never before. She had existed solely in his mind for so many years as to become only a beautiful image, a dream of his life before. Her essence had fled—had been captured and destroyed by the vacuum, by the nothingness and chaos that took the real and the tangible and made it meaningless. Alexis could see in the silver, reflecting plane her blank, passionless eyes. Dominique had died long ago.

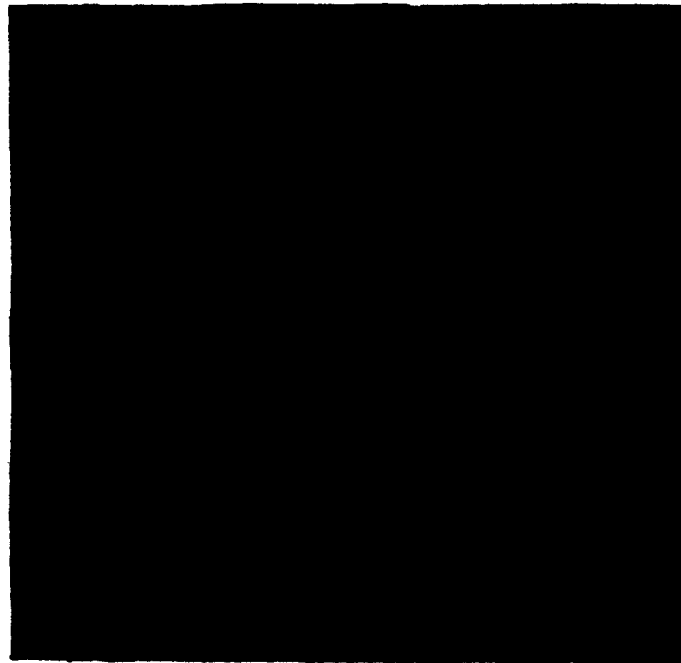
He then looks down and notices the brass plate.

Nestled along the center of the frame, leaning up against the mirror as on ancient paintings once displayed in museums, is a word engraved in brass. A title. Barely able to see it, he strains his eyes, unbelieving.

*Art*

Minutes later, he turns away from the piece and exits the room. The anteroom is vacant, as promised. Seeing the small black box still on the table as before, he approaches it and opens the top flap in a gradual, deliberate motion. There is blue inside, a warm, forgiving light with an ambiance as if surrounded by light dust. It dazzles slightly, almost imperceptibly like sunlight on a rippled pond, or constellations sparkling within ~~the expanse of the universe~~. Alexis places his right hand within and closes his eyes, allowing the solace of release to descend like black sleep as he disappears slowly, slowly—every molecule of his being dispersing gradually into a cosmos of emptiness.

*a velvet galaxy*



experiment: typographic  
considerations

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Sketches on back  
→

June 27, 1998

Jan--

I guess I could write an e-mail, but since I'm still in Quark, I'll print something out for you. I've finally started the real work on the thesis, and as you can see I've really only just started.

I left you a copy of the page size and format I'm thinking of doing—6x6" pages in a box 6.5"x6.5". I think I will go ahead and do lithographs for the black square pages we talked about because I don't want them to look like computer printouts—I want that deep, flat black. I also want to go with a Bodoni-based font, perhaps an Emigre font like Mrs. Eaves or Filosofia. I think the clarity and prestige of these Bodoni-influenced fonts give the feel I want. I can get them from work easy enough—tut, tut, I know, but they really are the fonts I want to use. Write any notes about the leading and size if you don't think it will work. I basically just want it to be clean and precise, and I'll probably leave the book with single-sided pages.

The reason I've been somewhat slow on getting into this is because Y&L is working me to death! Talk about exploiting the intern. . . Actually, they just happen to be very busy this summer and I actually get to do some design work. I already designed a letterhead and promo materials folder for an exhibit the Children's Museum is trying to lease out to other national museums (it's called "Flight"). The design just got approval and the Museum director really liked it. I'll try to leave you a copy next time. I'm also working on a logo design for a major department store (Von Maur), which is opening its first stores in Indiana, as well as some signage for a temporary labor service (Tandem). The variety of work they have me working on is great, and I'm finally getting used to the pace. It still bothers me that I'm rushed all the time because I've really been trying to do a lot of research and conceptualizing for the projects. Oh well. . . Carolyn has already hinted about a job after I graduate, but I told her I was hoping to head West.

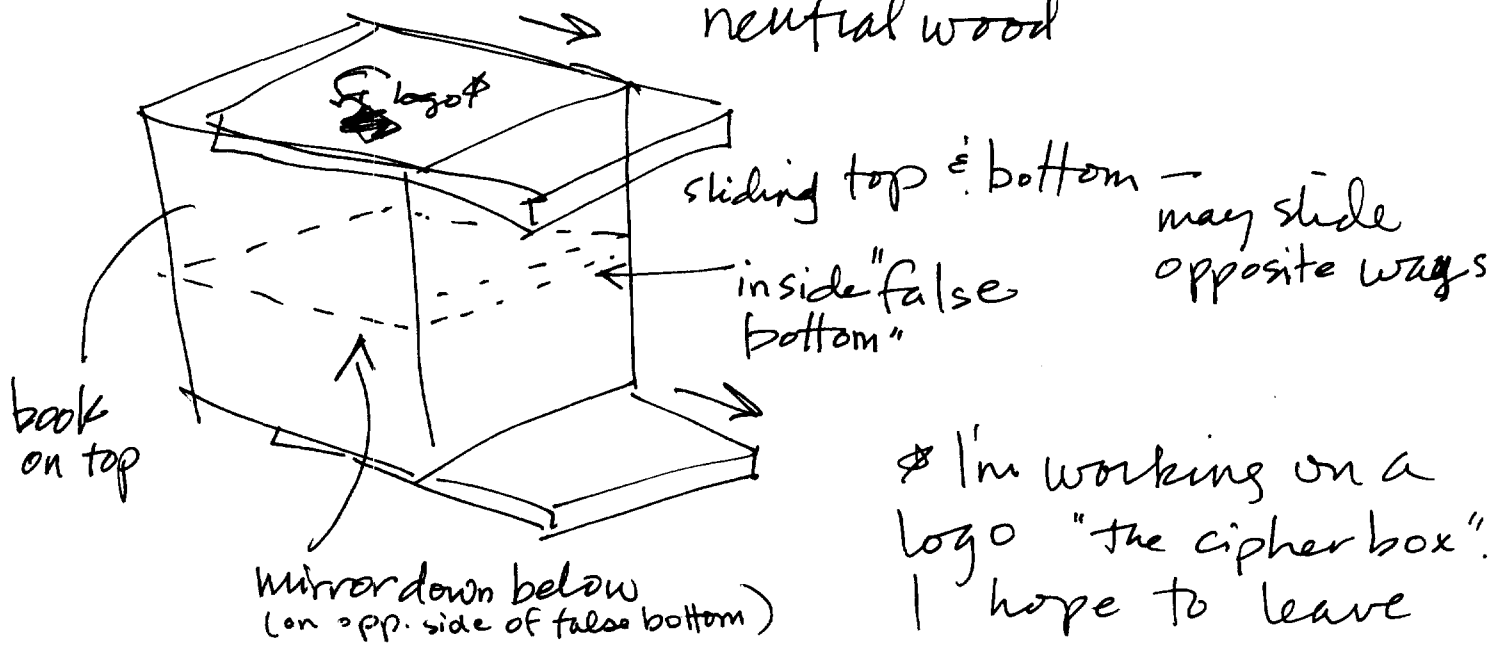
That is all for now. Please leave notes, etc. over e-mail, the printouts I left you or whatever. I hope you are having a good summer and enjoy your 4th of July weekend!

sharon m.

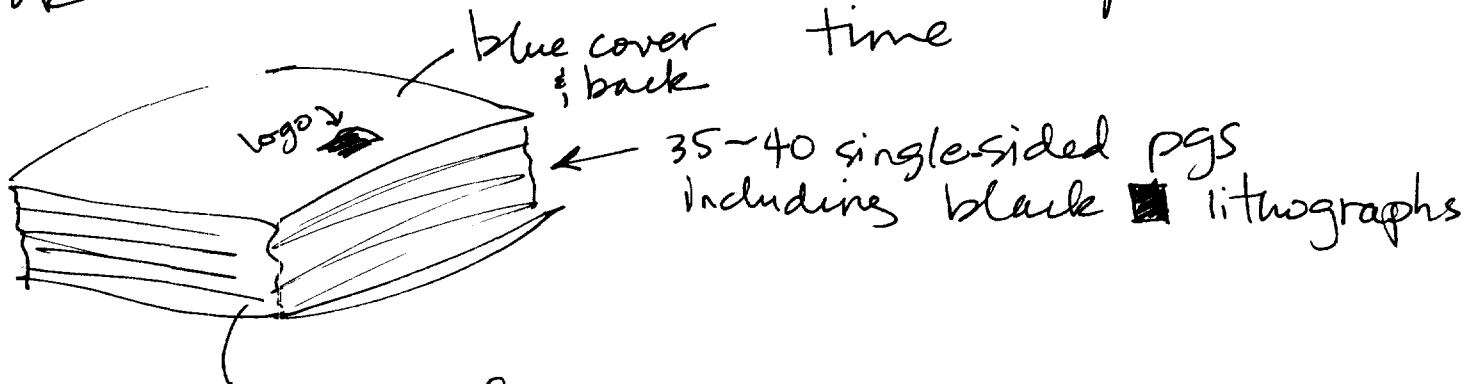
p.s. Have you heard the sad news—Dr. Meyers died just recently! I couldn't believe it! He's done so much for the Honors College. . .

Wooden box — walnut?

neutral wood



Book



\* I'm working on a logo "the cipher box".  
I hope to leave some comps next time

Some kind of  
optic stitch;  
something to allow  
the book to open  
flat. Could I borrow  
your handmade  
books book to  
get some ideas?

4/3

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9pt

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\* 9.5

after hours  
~~after hours~~

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10 pt.

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how can he see her eyes. Could he  
sense them? Or could he  
see them as fragments in his own?

the strength of a deep, deep loss. Looking into the flat reflection of himself, Alexis senses Dominique's absence as never before. She had existed solely in his mind for so many years as to become only a beautiful image, a dream of his life before. Her essence had fled—had been captured and destroyed by ~~nothingness~~ by ~~nothingness~~ and chaos ~~that took the real and the~~ ~~unthinkable and made~~ ~~it~~ meaningless. Alexis could see in the silver, reflecting plane her blank, passionless eyes. Dominique had died long ago.

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## Art

Minutes later, he turns away from the piece and exits the room. The anteroom is vacant, as promised. Seeing the small black box still on the table as before, he approaches it and opens the top flap in a gradual, deliberate motion. There is blue inside, a warm, forgiving light with an ambiance as if surrounded by light dust. It dazzles slightly, almost imperceptibly like sunlight on a rippled pond, or constellations sparkling within a velvet galaxy. Alexis places his right hand within and closes his eyes, allowing the solace of release to descend like black sleep as he disappears slowly, slowly—every molecule of his being dispersing gradually into a cosmos of emptiness.

no more than  
sensed

substitute 'nothing more than'  
or simply? only seems  
cheap...

4 I'd not use *italic*. I think it gives too much of motion / drama. Better to have simple roman here?

106 P13  
abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

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7-3-98

Jan-

Tentative calendar:

Wk. July 6-10 - choose,  
assemble paper,  
final corrections  
on copy

11 July - Columbus OH to  
make boxes  
(with Mike's dad!)

12 July - print lit/emboss  
□s

13-18.... bind book +  
finish boxes (place  
mirror, etc.)

\* we can try to set up  
some time after you  
get back / before I leave  
to see the final box!

Here are my final book  
pages. If possible, could you  
please look over them for  
any major typos, etc. - I to the story  
made yet some more CHANGES -  
slight, but different nonetheless...

Next weekend I'm going to make  
the boxes + hopefully the  
black squares. I think the  
embossed white squares are a  
great idea! Let's try to do some  
of them for the end...

\* | checked out  
the 3 books. \*

- Sharon

p.s. I know it's tiresome to the eyes, but if you stare at  
the □ text for a while, you keep seeing squares...

beautiful flatness. The silver is recessed within the deep frame, the square box lacking two sides. It has a delicacy to its strange warp and how it is preserved here in the dustless Box forever. Alexis looks at himself.

The time in isolation has drawn his face down, and he appears much older. Or it may be the lighting which casts faint shadows down his cheeks describing all the minuscule imperfections on his greenish skin. He has never been handsome, but this flat reflection washes out his eyes and hair of color and makes the straight brow he inherited from his mother especially sharp. It usually gave the appearance of deep thought, but here it is added weight. Even the curved line of his father's jaw and the thickness of his nose do little to soften his expression. His pupils are black and round.

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like Boxes

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Is "Box Rooms" a proper name?  
Should R be capped?

; or plain comma?

again, plain comma? Semi-colon  
shouldn't separate a sentence  
fragment

See note page 10

type size?

comma

what's happening w/  
inconsistent letter spacing?  
more open is better  
reading...

like Mother's parties. For him as well, the house was a place to look and be appreciated, although his age eliminated any right to speak. At least not without direction.

→ "Come, dear Alexis," Mother would say, placing him on a tall, rectangular banister of the grand staircase so the ocean of eyes could see him. "Recite for us the Historian's Creed."

Such a display at various gala events was not unusual. Alexis would oblige dutifully and respectfully.

"We the Art Historians are the leaders of a necessary elite," he would say, his voice cracking as it fell upon those shining, upturned faces. "We possess the knowledge of the greatest of human abilities: discernment of the natural essence and beauty elucidated by Aesthetics. We seek the shared experience of the Artist, the journey into the obscurity of human thought conveyed through emotions that transcend time and space. We recognize, codify, and evaluate for the greater perfection of humanity the nature of the universe. We are the interpreters of genius and the sole protectors of universal forms. We are the purveyors of Truth."

Cheers and cries of bravo! bravo! Soren beams at her young son, the prodigy. His returned smile is brief and self-conscious.

Dominique was Alexis' sole childhood friend. Their fathers had been colleagues for a number of years—both botanists working at

the same BioLab near the city. Soren relished the fact that Alexis could associate with a future Artist at such a young age and arranged for the two to play together every Saturday morning in her husband's greenhouse. Dominique's favorite activity was to lie on her back upon a square of hybrid grasses and stare through the transparent roof at the sky. Once, Alexis plucked one of his father's daffodils for her, but Dominique covered her ears in pain.

"What's wrong, Dominique? I thought you liked flowers."

"They scream when you pluck them, Alexis," she replied, "It hurts my head."

the separation

Their conversations revolved around a dream to fly away and explore the outside world of which they had only seen glimpses—brief flashes of limitless air and horizons that shimmered in their memories. They maintained an unspoken agreement never to discuss the confinement of their small lives, nor the impending break in their friendship which they both felt only vaguely, like an oncoming hollowness. They knew their genes had betrayed them before birth, but when it happened, Alexis was still taken by surprise. He hadn't been warned of the date Dominique was to be taken to the Artist Communes, and so the following Saturday he patiently waited in his room for the house servant to show her in. She never appeared. Soren was gone again on an Assessment tour, so Alexis asked his



father where she might be. He answered with a straight face in the soft, logical voice he used to explain his genetic regeneration experiments.

"Dominique has gone to the Commune, Alexis. She is to be an Artist and must be in the company of other people who can teach her to understand her genius. We must accept this and be happy that the State is sensitive to the needs of all of its citizens, especially its Artists."

Alexis' own genetic charting predestined him to the work of a scientist or technologist. But Soren wouldn't be shamed so easily. As a result of her influences, just before birth Alexis had been upgraded to become an Historian like her. Shortly after Dominique's departure, Alexis was sent to the University of Aesthetic Studies.

Over the next fifteen years, Alexis learned everything known and knowable, thought, and written about Art history, the essential forms, the Aesthetic revelation of genius and its support of State supremacy. His days filled with discussions, seminars, and lectures over the New Enlightenment of the past century, the shift from economic to intellectual advancement of cultures, the Genetic Revolution, the Pax Aestheticus and creation of the world State and intellectual caste society. History, it seemed, had proven to the world the superiority of the Artist over science, technology and all other schools of thought. The University, the center of Art appreciation, almost convinced Alexis that becoming a great Historian like his mother was everything the

possessive?

cap?

*He first thought it.*

State said it was: an essential service to humanity to further advance the human mind and spirit toward perfection. He abandoned himself to academics and quickly emerged as one of the top minds of his class.

"Alexis, you are a true genius!" professors would exclaim, "You represent the future of our honored craft. You are wonderful, brilliant—the image of Soren. Will you be taking my class next term?"

As diligent as Alexis proved himself to be, in time the University experience fell short of expectation. While he was initially satisfied merely to gain the approval of his professors, he gradually became frustrated and anxious. At first he thought it was the increasing amount of assignments; the University's reputation rested greatly on the fact that many students would drop out or be ejected simply because they could not withstand the rigor and intensity of classes. But the insistence of his intellectual fatigue soon made him question the purpose of his academic training—something other students, in their bland conformity, never considered. Only so many individuals would rise to become Historians, the University said, and despite his doubts, Alexis was still determined to be one of them. Assuming this new weariness was yet another test of his perseverance, he focused his studies to a near obsession.

The distraction continued as he grew older, however, and one particular image began to haunt him: Dominique, lying on her back

in the greenhouse, staring at the sky with lids half-closed and her hands crossed over her chest. She was still his sole confidante, although in his mind she never spoke. He wished to fly again and wanted a return to the simplicity of his life before it had become so dense and uncomfortable. Sometimes he spoke to Dominique aloud, not realizing it until he noticed the curious stares. Other students at the University avoided him—some knew he didn't really belong and of the others, he wasn't sure. Assuming they were intimidated by his studiousness, he tried to ignore them. His mother was the only person who spoke with him outside classes during that time, but merely to reassure him: "This is your calling, Alexis." A calling to what, he wanted to ask.

And of course there were the Boxes.

"The Box is the sublime experience," the Magna Cognoscentes would say, "An artistic voyage in complete isolation. No more the flat dullness of pictures or the immobility of objects. The Box contains the essence of pure, Artistic thought—the manifestation of truth."

Alexis' first Box experience was at age twelve. With six years of study already, he was somewhat skeptical of the power the Boxes allegedly contained. Having read a great deal about the theory of Boxes, the esteem with which they were held in the Artworld, and their importance in perpetuating the truths of the State, he didn't

? needed?

them

anticipate any surprises in that first viewing. He couldn't have been more unprepared.

The Boxes themselves were separate rooms within the long hallways of museums. On the day of his first viewing, Alexis stepped into his assigned Box, one in a line of many darkened chambers. It brightened immediately as he reached the center to reveal a seven-meter-square floor, pristine white walls and no windows. Alexis was slightly taken aback; he had always assumed from various readings that there would be installations of some sort inside—perhaps something physical made in the manner of Artists from ages ago. But there was nothing at all.

After a few moments of impatience, the Box experience began. The fuzzy weight of sleep relaxed him, and Alexis dreamed of his first oral examination at the University. Having been so anxious and afraid of failure that day, he had made himself sick. But here in the Box he felt quite calm and watched his dreamself with a peculiar sense of confidence. While the massive classroom stretched before him—their glassy eyes staring, the Magna Cognoscente and his drilling questions about the discourse of Artists, the utopia of the State—Alexis felt splendid, especially as the image of his younger self began to prevail over the examination. But nearly as quickly as it started, the blurry, distant vision disappeared and left Alexis alone again in the empty room. He felt very content for a moment